Title of Thesis:

TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF INDIAN LITERARY FEMINISM: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NOVELS OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA, NAYANTARA SAHGAL AND ANITA DESAI

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Synopsis

In my thesis I study the work of Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai. I study the the formal and ideological developments of each writer individually and place her work within its social, cultural and historical context. I focus on the following four areas: 1) the formal preoccupations of each writer and her political 'message'; 2) the representation of women in their novels; 3) the intersection between Hindu ideology and ideals of passivity and suffering; 4) the treatment of specific forms of female suffering and oppression such as subordination within the joint family, sati, dowry deaths and the social ostracism of widows.

I analyse seventeen texts in all: Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve, A Silence of Desire, A Handful of Rice, Two Virgins and The Golden Honeycomb; Sahgal's autobiographies (Prison and Chocolate Cake and From Fear Set Free) and five of her novels (A Time To Be Happy, The Day in Shadow, A Situation in New Delhi, Rich Like Us and Plans For Departure); Desai's Cry The Peacock, Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go This Summer?, Clear Light of Day and In Custody.

I reveal that the work of these writers shares seven key elements: formal plurality and ideological diversity; a thematic preoccupation with conceptions of nationhood; an affirmation of cultural and sexual difference; a development towards a feminist protest; the use of debate for the revaluation of national ideals; a selective form of protest; and the depiction and interrogation of fatalism and passivity. I suggest that these elements constitute a broad frame of reference in which Indo-Anglian women's literature can be set, and argue that current feminist literary theory must draw from the specific cultural and historical background of women's texts if it is to be of relevance to women from different parts of the world.

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The opening section (pp. 368-95) of Chapter Ten contains material previously used in my M.A. dissertation on 'The Fictions of National Identity: Representations of India in Selected Novels of Narayan, Desai and Rushdie'.

1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Indo-Anglian Women Novelists

Since Independence India has seen a remarkable rise in the number of published Indian women novelists. The work of some of the most recent of them - such as Suniti Namjoshi, Bapsi Sidhwa, Bharati Mukherjee and Shashi Deshpande - is formally diverse and ideologically varied, revealing a plurality of interests and allegiances which nevertheless draws from a shared cultural and historical background. In my thesis I undertake a study of the three most notable, long-standing and prolific Indo-Anglian women writers, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai, in order both to illuminate the preoccupations, themes and ideological perspectives of the individual writers, and also to establish a broad conceptual framework within which the work of their successors, the new generation of Indian women writers, might be set.

What will be seen is that Markandaya, Sahgal and Desai are very different writers. Markandaya's formal diversity

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and focus on the interaction between the individual and social contingency, Sahgal's social realism and nationalist historical perspective, and Desai's 'modern sensibility'[1] and studies of the complex human psyche, describe contrasting formal and ideological allegiances. Markandaya's work whilst subscribing to some of the demands of 'popular fiction' contains, as I will show, a socially-critical perspective. Sahgal's work on the other hand whilst being recognisably politically contentious is, I argue, rather inflexible in its ability to handle contemporary social complexities. Desai's work, in contrast, contains an apparently exclusive focus on the individual psyche which, however, draws from a deep understanding of social iniquity. Between them, I argue, Markandaya, Sahgal and Desai describe the three structural and ideological co-ordinates within which an emergent tradition of Indian women's fiction can be analysed.

This study is therefore not about making definitions - for, as one critic has pointed out, art is not an object but a process, and 'processes...can never be categorised by means of static definitions simply because they are processes'.[2] Rather it seeks to analyse the work of Markandaya, Sahgal and Anita Desai as part of a literary development - a literary movement of post-Independence women's writing - that is in continual dialogue with its

historical, cultural and social context. In the contradictions and tensions within and between their novels, we can see literature contending with a social reality - a literary tradition that is torn between and contained within the conflicting demands of an evolving, assimilative culture.

In this introduction I begin with a brief analysis of the reality of Indian women's oppression today and its historical background. I then study some of its cultural constituents. In my third section I look at two of the key theoretical problems raised by a study of this kind, and in my final section reveal the methodology and approach undertaken in this study.

Feminism: The Social and Historical Background

When India became independent in 1947 its constitutional aims included the granting of liberty, justice, equality and fraternity to all. The women of India had played a key part in the nationalist movement through their widespread support for Mahatama Gandhi, their maintenance of the struggle through lobbies and strikes whilst their husbands went to prison, and their support of the struggle from within prison itself. They had an overwhelming claim to the rights they had fought for. Some

constitutional changes were brought in to improve their lot and those of other oppressed groups: the age of marriage was raised from twelve to fourteen for girls; the ban on widow remarriage was lifted; sati (which was abolished by the British in the nineteenth century) was officially reviled and anyone aiding a widow to commit sati could be punished by death; dowries were abolished and untouchability was lifted.

Yet, as Kiran Devendra has shown, constitutional changes have done little to affect social practice.[3] Female infanticide and child marriage remain rife in rural India; although the minimum legal age for marriage is now eighteen for women and twenty-one for men, recent studies have shown that the most common age for marriage in India is nine for girls and eleven for boys;[4] sati is still in practice; dowries are the norm; untouchables are still social outcastes; and widows are neglected and ostracised as symbols of bad luck. Technological imports from the west - such as the amniocentesis test which enables the early prediction of the sex of a baby - have led to a form of selective abortion involving the killing of female foetuses.[5] What this last practice illustrates is that the hasty and unconsidered imposition of western ideals of family planning onto an alien culture can have disastrous

results, extending rather than alleviating endemic forms of discrimination.

These injustices are clearly the result of complex economic, cultural and social factors that lie outside the scope of this study. What they all share, however, is a conception of women as dependent and - in extreme cases - disposable liabilities. Indeed, one sociologist has gone so far as to claim that 'the problem before the majority of Indian women today is not equality but survival'.[6]

Gender Ideology: Cultural Ideals of Womanhood

Although there are many mythical archetypes, the Indian ideal of womanhood is epitomised by Sita, the heroine of the Ramayana. Abducted by the evil king of Lanka, Ravana, Sita remains chaste and ever loyal to her husband Rama. When Rama finally manages to overcome Ravana and bring Sita back to India he asks her to prove her faithfulness to him by walking through a ring of fire. This Sita dutifully does and is accepted by her husband. Yet, in the course of time his doubts return, upon which Sita, in despair, calls for mother earth to swallow her up - the earth gapes open and Sita disappears into it.[7]

This ideal of womanly devotion has a wide currency in India. It is an ideal which Gandhi used in order to mobilise women's support although, as one critic has shown, 'Gandhi...stress[ed] the moral superiority of female suffering rather than woman's ability for political intervention'.[8] Kumari Jayawardena explores this point:

> Gandhi placed particular stress on the issue of non-violent struggle, claiming that women had great ability to endure suffering. He claimed that the principle of 'non-violence' (ahimsa) and political non-violent resistance was suited to women as they were by nature non-violent. 'I do believe', he wrote in 1938, 'that woman is more fitted than man to make ahimsa. For the courage of self-sacrifice woman is any way superior to man'.[9]

Jayawardena has compared Gandhi's perception that women are, in his own words, the 'nobler' sex - 'the embodiment of sacrifice, humility, faith and knowledge' - to that projected by Nehru, who emphasised the need for women to have economic independence. Although both men clearly tried to gain women's support to achieve their political ends - Gandhi appealing to women's 'innate' sense of moral justice and capacity for sacrifice and Nehru supporting their demands for women's rights - as part of the nationalist movement, Nehru went so far as to express dissatisfaction with the old ideal of Indian womanhood:

> 'I must confess to you that I am intensely dissatisfied with the lot of Indian women today. We hear a good deal about Sita and Savitri. They are

> revered names in India and rightly so, but I have a feeling that these echoes from the past are raised chiefly to hide our present deficiencies and to prevent us from attacking the root cause of women's degradation in India today.'[10]

The ideal of the suffering but stoic woman, has had a significant impact on the work of Indian writers (women as well as men) in English. As Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, 'numerous characters are found to adhere to classical prototypes - especially the women of fiction who persistently re-enact the suffering, sacrificing role of Sita...'. It is a cultural ideal of womanhood that points to a basic discrepancy between Indian values and those of the West. As Mukherjee argues, 'the fulfilment of oneself, [a]... desirable... goal according to the individualistic ideals of western society, has always been alien to Indian tradition', and the ideal of renunciation, be it the 'renunciation of worldly goods and possessions or the renunciation of selfish motives, passion and emotional bondage', still holds sway in India.[11]

This discrepancy between Eastern and Western values reveals a fundamental problem facing the feminist critic of Indian women's writing: how best to analyse the work of women writers who belong to a culture where individualism and protest are apparently alien ideas. The demand of

(western) prescriptive feminists for assertive female role-models[12] clearly flies in the face of the cultural referents of some Indian writers who are no less concerned with the oppressions of women. In my next section I will analyse this problem in greater detail. I will show how the work of Indian women writers must not only be analysed from a culturally, socially and historically specific context, but also how some of those critics who may be best placed to undertake such culturally specific readings, namely critics writing from within India, have failed to live up to the challenge.

Constructing a Theoretical Framework

A significant number of feminist critics have drawn attention to some of the limitations found in the work of contemporary feminist theorists who overlook fundamental differences in the social, cultural and historical experiences of women from different parts of the world. Germaine Greer, writing about the Inauguration of International Women's Day by the United Nations has noted:

> The decision to have a women's year was simply a belated recognition of the fashionableness of feminism in the West. Western lifestyles dominate the U.N. self-image, despite their manifest irrelevance to most of the people at present living upon the planet. Thus, women from countries where the majority of the female population is pregnant and performing unpaid hard labour in the fields, are quite happy to discuss 'marriage or a career' in terminology culled

> from McCalls. IWY is a simple extension of Madison Avenue feminism: the agricultural labourers of Asia and Africa might as well lay down their hoes and light up a Virginia Slim.[13]

Greer's comments are important in that they highlight the parochialism of much western feminism. Such parochialism is carried through to the level of feminist scholarship in general which, as Chandra Mohanty points out in her eloquent article, is 'made on the basis of the privileging of a particular group as the norm or referent'.[14]

For a truly comprehensive form of feminist theory to come into being, it is necessary to take on board the specificities of cultural and historical difference; otherwise, as Spivak has shown 'our most benevolent impulses' may do more harm than good.[15] One of these differences is the varying degree of importance ascribed to conceptions of identity and the individual among different social groups. In her illuminating essay 'Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression', Bell Hooks has argued that by focussing on individual concerns, such as the psycho-dynamics of oppression, identity, consciousness-raising, the need for creating a community feeling and 'space' for women to talk, current feminist theory has been orientated around the liberal preoccupation with answering individual need. In the process feminist theory has eschewed what Hooks describes

as 'the cultural basis of group oppression' and failed to address the needs and concerns of black women:

> ... many black women as well as women from other ethnic groups do not feel an absence of community among women in their lives despite exploitation and oppression. The focus on feminism as a way to develop shared identity and community has little appeal to women who experience community, who seek ways to end exploitation and oppression in the context of their lives. While they may develop an interest in a feminist politic that works to eradicate sexist oppression, they will probably never feel as intense a need for a 'feminist' identity and lifestyle.[16]

Her words are particularly apt in the light of the Indian social context where women often live in a community apart from men. Female segregation, in the form of purdah, and women's concentration in separate roles either within the nuclear or the joint family, can result in the construction of a distinctly female realm of experience and understanding which diminishes the need for a protracted analysis of individual identity.

Indeed, Anita Desai has claimed that the very conception of individual identity is alien to Indian thinking[17] - a theory which my study of the writing of these post-Independence Indian women writers would seem to bear out. Both Markandaya and Sahgal for example subsume their interest in individuals within the wider framework of a quest for national identity. Their work conforms to

the view put forward by the black critic Bernice Jonson Reagon that 'We are at the base of our identities, nationalists. We are people builders, [and] carriers of cultural traditions'.[18]

This difference of outlook between Indians and Westerners clearly supports the argument for taking a culturally-specific approach to the work of Indian women writers. Western feminism, for example, contains within it both a history and a conception of militancy which is inappropriate to an Indian context in which women became politically active through a movement of 'passive resistance'. Indeed, that militancy itself is perhaps particularly alien to the Indian - specifically Hindu - context. As one critic of Indo-Anglian literature has pointed out, in Indian thought action is 'illusory because the original order cannot be changed, only temporarily disturbed'.[19]

These cultural differences mean that 'feminist protest' in the work of Indian women writers tends to be expressed in an idiosyncratic way. As Duley and Edwards have pointed out in their study of Indian feminism: 'there is a desire to avoid the perils of excessive Western individualism and to recognize that the family, for example, can be supportive as well as oppressive. There is

also a conscious effort to draw on Indian symbolism'.[20] This emphasis on the family and home is evident in literary texts in which women characters are often shown to be wives and mothers. If, as Meenakshi Mukherjee argues, 'marital bliss is a more frequent subject in Indian novels than romantic love',[21] then we might also expect to find that in Indian feminist novels the central source of conflict is that found between wives and their husbands and rests upon women's role within the home.

In view of the need for a culturally-specific reading of Indo-Anglian women's fiction, it is a point of concern that some of the critics who are best in a position to engage in such readings often fail to do justice to the literary complexity of the texts. As Saros Cowasjee has pointed out, 'there is a dearth of first-rate criticism' of Indo-Anglian fiction as a whole, resulting in the fact 'no critical tradition has emerged'.[22] Graham Parry has qualified Cowasjee's views in his observation that many Indian critics display both ostentatiousness and pedantry when 'they offer judgement on the imaginative creations of their more talented countrymen'.[23]

Whilst these weaknesses are undoubtedly not the exclusive preserve of Indian critics, they have, in many cases, resulted in appraisals of the work of Indian women

writers which are notable more for their patronising sense of chivalry than for the arguments they carry. For example, one critic has described the work of Indian women in the most syrupy terms, reducing the texts to the emanation of disparate (but surprisingly harmonious) 'sweet voices'; another has alluded to the 'decorous thoughts, seemly traits, fineness of existence, stream of sympathy [and] benign feminism' of Desai's suffering heroines.[24] Indeed the work of women writers, including that of Markandaya, Sahgal and Desai, has been subjected to some extreme forms of what Mary Ellman has described as 'phallic criticism' in which 'books by women are treated as though they themselves were women' and male reviewers fail to 'attach the same degree of authority to a voice they know to be female'.[25] Thus one of Markandaya's novels which focuses on the theme of girls' sexuality has been described as 'pornographic'; Sahgal has been labelled a 'B-grade novelist' and Desai's work hailed as no less than the 'splendorous revelations of her palpable being'.[26] The need for an informed critical tradition is particularly urgent in the case of these women writers whose thematic and ideological preoccupations extend to embrace feminist concerns.

It is hoped that the following study of feminism in the work of Indian women writers - and I use the term

'feminism' in its broadest sense as one that describes 'a shared experience of oppression'[27] - will not only serve as a significant contribution to the study of Indo-Anglian fiction but will also add a new dimension to the field of feminist criticism in general. My study aims to put forward a broad framework for the study of Indian women's writing - one that challenges and forces a redefinition of both the dominant categories of Western feminist criticism and those categories of analysis made by a small but significant school of Indian critics engaging in 'phallic criticism'.

Aims and Methodology

My thesis will focus on the following four areas:

1) the relationship between the formal preoccupations of each writer and her political 'message';

2) the representation of women in the novels;

3) the intersection between Hindu ideology and ideals of passivity and nobility of suffering as seen in the work of the writers

4) the treatment of specific forms of female suffering and oppression such as subordination within the joint family, sati, dowry deaths and the social ostracism of widows.

Whilst all the writers belong to an educated élite and have considerable contact with the West (Markandaya, for example, is married to an Englishman and Desai's mother was German) they draw from a variety of Indian subjects and themes in their work. Each writer for example explores the experiences of women from different backgrounds and classes of India. Whereas Markandaya's work focuses on the problems of the working and peasant class, Sahgal's work focuses on the very different problems of the enfranchised professional class, and Desai prioritises the problems experienced by middle-class housewives.

In the following pages I will define and analyse the constituents of 'feminism' as it emerges in the work of Markandaya, Sahgal and Desai. It will become clear that each writer's work embodies a distinct world-view, separated from the others partly by aesthetic allegiances (Realism in Markandaya and Sahgal as opposed to Modernism in Desai), partly by political perspectives (liberal humanism in Markandaya and Desai as opposed to Gandhian ideology in Sahgal), and partly by geographical focus (the

rural peasant existence of Markandaya's South India; the corridors of power of Sahgal's North India and the urban experience of Desai's Bombay and Calcutta). Yet the writers are equally significant for what they have in common - most notably a form of feminist protest which is structured, in different ways, around nationalism and national identity. By placing their work in its precise historical context, it will be seen to constitute an emergent, often tentative and frequently contradictory voice of protest, affirmation and subversion.

Notes and References

1. Atma Ram, 'Interview with Anita Desai', p. 96.
2. Roger Taylor, Art an Enemy of the People, p. 13.
3. Kiran Devendra, Status and Position of Women in India, pp. 102-08.

4. Joni Seager and Ann Olsen, Women in the World: An International Atlas, Chart Two.

5. Devendra, pp. 108-10.

6. M. Mukhopadhyay, Silver Shackles, p. 5.

7. There are a few variations to the end of the story, but all of them work to affirm the ideal of sacrifice and wifely duty.

8. Meena Alexander, 'Outcaste Power: Ritual Displacement and Virile Maternity in Indian Women Writers', p. 23.

9. Kumari Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World, p. 97.

10. Ibid., pp. 95, 97-99 and 98.

11. Meenakshi Mukherjee, The Twice Born Fiction, pp. 29 and 100.

12. Cheri Register, 'American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction' in Feminist Literary Theory, edited by Mary Eagleton, pp. 171-74.

13. Germaine Greer, 'International Women's Day, International Women's Year (1975), The Madwoman's Underclothes, p. 195.

14. Chandra Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', p. 65.

15. Gayatri Spivak, 'French Feminism in an International Frame' in Feminist Literary Theory, as above, p. 39.

16. Bell Hooks, in 'Feminism a Movement to End Sexist Oppression' in Feminism and Equality, ed. by Anne

Phillips, p. 72.

17. From my interview with Anita Desai on 27 May 1987. See my 'Introduction to Anita Desai'.

18. Bernice Jonson Reagon quoted in Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves', p. 43.

19. Klaus Steinvorth, The Indo-English Novel, p. 111.

20. Margot Duley and Mary Edwards, The Cross-Cultural Study of Women, p. 230.

21. Mukherjee, p. 28.

22. Saros Cowasjee, 'The Problems of Teaching Indian Fiction in Commonwealth Countries', Awakened Conscience: Studies in Commonwealth Literature, ed. C.D. Narasimhaiah, pp. pp. 418 and 419.

23. Graham Parry,'Indian Fiction and Criticism', p. 79.

24. Narsingh Srivastava, 'Some Indian Women Writers in English' pp. 63-72; B.O. Vyas, 'Viscid Voices of the Inner Kingdom', p. 3.

25. Ellman, from Thinking About Women quoted in Moi's Sexual/Textual Politics pp. 33 and 35.

26. S. A. Narayan, 'India', JCL (1985), p. 87; S. Krishna Sarma, 'Positive Living', p. 166; B.O. Vyas, 'Viscid Voices of the Inner Kingdom', p. 2.

27. Michele Barrett, 'Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics' in Feminist Literary Theory, as above, p. 163.

INTRODUCTION TO KAMALA MARKANDAYA: THE QUEST FOR SYNTHESIS

Kamala Markandaya as an Indian Woman Novelist

Kamala Markandaya has been compared to writers as diverse as Alan Paton, R.K. Narayan, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai - a testimony to the diversity of form and theme to be found in her ten novels. She has been represented as sharing the 'epic' form of Paton's Cry, The Beloved Country; the humanism of Narayan's portrayal of individual character; the 'Gandhian' exaltation of tradition characteristic of Sahgal's work; and the thematic concerns of Desai.[1] To what extent can these parallels be justified? And, given the apparent ease with which they can be made, what unified ideology - if any - can be said to underpin her oeuvre? These are the questions I shall explore in the following pages.

Kamala Markandaya's first published work, Nectar in a Sieve, established her as a major figure in Indo-Anglian fiction. The novel, subtitled 'A Novel of Rural India', describes the fluctuating fortunes of the wife of peasant farmer, and is similar in many ways to Raja Rao's epic story of village life, Kanthapura. Both novels are told

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from the perspective of an old woman, and both chronicle the effects of social and political change on a rural community that has apparently only limited political power. Yet if Kanthapura can be seen as a pre-Independence novel Markandaya's work, whilst drawing on some of the same concerns, is clearly a post-Independence text, carrying over Rao's nationalist search for an authentic Indian identity into a post-nationalist quest for a cultural synthesis.

As has often been noted, Markandaya's novels focus on polarities: the divisions between East and West, the tensions between the country and the city, and the conflict between traditional ways and modern ideas. These polarities have even been seen as a symptom of her personal history as an Indian who has married an Englishman and settled in England.[2]

But it would be more accurate to describe these polarities, not as separate and antagonistic entities, but as different realms of experience thrown together by history and undergoing the painful and transforming process of mutual accommodation. Unlike Sahgal, who juxtaposes a static set of values with an unstable present, Markandaya registers the interpenetration of contending realities. She does this by focussing on the

evolving consciousness of her characters, and presents the impact of change and development on the community through the subjective and often paradoxical experience of the individual.

These concerns with individual experience and the integrity of the individual consciousness form an essential part of Markandaya's humanism. Her fiction is notable in the field of Indo-Anglian women's literature in its concern to penetrate the often idealised surface of village life to the actual hardships and endemic physical suffering of its inhabitants - the agricultural labourers and peasants who constitute over 80% of India's population. And yet Markandaya herself has been careful to dissociate her work from 'a do-gooding path', saying that in literature there should be 'neither black nor white, nor capitalist nor communist: there is only the human brotherhood'.[3]

This marks one of the main differences between Markandaya's and Sahgal's use of 'Gandhian' ideology. Whereas Sahgal brings to bear upon the present a view of an idealised past, Markandaya is concerned to depict the complexities of daily survival in a society whose traditions, while offering some solace, provide no practical solutions to the problems faced by India's poor.

This difference in perspective reflects a fundamental difference in the way each writer weaves political nationalism into her literary representation. In all but the most recent of Sahgal's novels one finds an uninterrogated reference to what Raymond Williams has described as a 'Golden Age', what he takes to be symptomatic of a certain 'retrospective radicalism'.[4] In Markandaya's work on the other hand the past is never fixed, and values are relative. Indeed, social change is registered in the evolving consciousness of her individual characters. Value does not reside in some ideal concept of truth, but in the ability of those characters to maintain their psychological integrity.

In many ways, then, her work falls between the categories that define Sahgal's work and those which define that of Anita Desai. Like Sahgal she is a realist writer who has been clearly influenced by the nationalist desire to document the times, and like Desai she shows a flexibility of moral outlook that reveals an acceptance of ambiguity and paradox.

Her treatment of women characters and women's concerns is also one that shares features of both Sahgal's and Desai's work whilst at the same time being markedly different. Like Sahgal she is careful to raise the

question of the specifics of female oppression, and sees the condition of women as an index of social change; and like Desai she is careful to relate events through her character's experience.

And yet Markandaya can be set apart from her counterparts in four important ways: the interaction between the social world and the psychological experience of her characters; the focus on working class and peasant experience, in particular on the impact of industrialisation and modernisation on the community; the focus on the distinctive ways of the Indian south where Markandaya herself was born; and a close attention to the social diversity and inequalities within Indian society as a whole.

These differences clearly influence the way Markandaya depicts women's oppression. Whereas Sahgal's early and middle novels reduce women's problems to largely one-dimensional elements on a broad and putatively all-embracing historical field and Desai's 'feminist' texts are concerned with the construction of a discrete realm of female experience, Markandaya seeks to link the realms of public and private experience. In all but her weakest novel, Possession, she represents oppression - particularly in its forms of violence and rape - as the

outcome of multiple factors: economic, cultural, and psychological. Her depiction of violence and rape in A Handful of Rice, for example, acknowledges the link between such violence and the individual's sense of his own very real powerlessness.

The Novels

Markandaya's novels fall into two principal thematic categories: novels which interrogate issues of economic exploitation, racism and the clash of national allegiances (Some Inner Fury, Possession, The Coffer Dams, The Nowhere Man and The Golden Honeycomb), and novels which analyse the impact of Western, urban, ways on a predominantly agricultural country (Nectar in a Sieve, A Silence of Desire, A Handful of Rice, Two Virgins and Pleasure City). Yet to slot Markandaya's novels into these categories is to ignore a more fundamental thematic concern that unifies her entire oeuvre: namely, the quest for synthesis - what Nehru has described as 'some kind of dream of unity'[5] - between apparently polarised cultural, sexual and political realities as they are defined and experienced by individual characters. It is in the contradictions between these contending realities that Markandaya most powerfully portrays an India in the process of radical change. From Nectar in a Sieve, which depicts the

transformation of village life through the eyes of the wife of a tenant farmer, to her most recent novel, Pleasure City, which describes the development of a hotel complex through the eyes of a boy, this category of novels offers a sensitive portrayal of a country at the crossroads. In this chapter I will explore Markandaya's quest for synthesis in Nectar in a Sieve, A Silence of Desire, A Handful of Rice, and Two Virgins. I show how this nationalist concern gradually breaks down as Markandaya becomes increasingly engaged with feminist issues. I have chosen to devote a separate chapter to The Golden Honeycomb, a recent novel in which her thematic concern for synthesis leads to a penetrating portrayal of the nature of female oppression - and the opportunities for female assertion - within a stridently masculine world.

In Markandaya's quest for synthesis she not only navigates her way through contending and contradictory realms of individual experience and belief, but also explores the adequacy of different generic forms to the task of describing a world whose instability and multiplicity serve to breach, subvert or transform formal generic conventions. For example her novels reveal great stylistic diversity, moving from the epic to the comic with surprising fluidity. Her intention would appear to be

the creation of multiple perspectives within the text, a rendering visible and accessible of the dynamics of human struggle. To interpret Markandaya's novels in purely sociological terms[6] is not only to deny their formal complexity: it is also to misrepresent their meaning. As Eagleton, commenting on Lukacs' arguments against crude attempts to raid literary works for their ideological content, puts it:

> ...the true bearers of ideology in art are the very forms, rather than the abstractable content, of the work itself. We find the impress of history in the literary work precisely as literary, not as some superior form of social documentation.[7]

Markandaya's use of multiple genres also constitutes a quest on her part for clarity; a way of making language reveal rather than obscure the worlds of her characters. This is a reaction to what she has elsewhere described as 'a hangover from the past, when Indian novels were wordy, metaphysical and unreadable'. Markandaya places herself in a new tradition of 'Indian writing [which] has shed its curlicues and is both limpid and readable'.[8]

It is odd, given the generic multiplicity of Markandaya's novels, that certain critics have slotted them into a generalised category of 'formula fiction' - a critical strategy that operates by isolating one aspect of

each novel to the exclusion of all others. Nectar in a Sieve, A Handful of Rice and Two Virgins, for example, have all been characterised as Mythical or Epic narratives[9] despite the fact that they differ dramatically in their formal strategies. Other critics - notably K. S. N. Rao - have argued, incorrectly, that Markandaya's work is limited by the one-dimensional characterisation of popular fiction: 'almost all the characters ...are emphatically true types rather than sharply marked individuals'.[10]

Against these reductive interpretations of Markandaya's novels, I shall demonstrate in the following two chapters how Markandaya uses multiple forms - the epic, comedy, tragedy and romance forms - to negate the possibility of moral absolutes, to affirm the relativity of truth, and to reveal the absence of meaning at the heart of human enterprise.

The Representation of Women in Markandaya's Novels

Markandaya's Indian women characters are most often drawn from the working class and are shown, like the upper-middle class women who people Sahgal's early novels, to be touchstones of tradition. This perspective of women as close to tradition is furthered in those novels, such

as A Silence of Desire and A Handful of Rice, where primacy is given to the male perspective. The Indian women characters are shown to be conventionally quiet - a significant 'unknown' to their husbands and fathers. This somewhat idealised depiction of them as the embodiments of traditional virtues who supply the moral fibre in the novels breaks down, however, when Markandaya focuses on the female perspective. In the two principal works narrated from the Indian women's perspective, Nectar in a Sieve and Two Virgins, the characters, though rural, stoic, and attached to traditional ways, are shown to be both confused and insecure.

This confusion is shown to stem from the destabilising tension between tradition and the influence of modern ways. Women, as the putative bearers of tradition, become by the same token the psychological barometers of social change. They endure the flux and flow of history, deprived of social and political power, certainly, but embodying a power of an altogether different kind - the power of female sexuality, imagination and spiritual faith. These are all forms of power which women can exert despite, or in some ways because of, patriarchal domination. Even when women have considerable material and social power, as in The Golden Honeycomb, that power is

shown to be drawn in large part from their relationship to men of wealth and influence.

Markandaya's presentation of women's oppression emerges from a nationalist concern for what Larson has described as 'cultural renewal'.[11] The majority of her novels are written or set during the time of massive industrial growth in the Fifties and Sixties, and describe the deleterious effect of urbanisation and Westernisation in a predominantly agricultural country. No other Indian woman novelist writing in English has devoted so much of her work to the study of the impact, both psychological and cultural, that imperialism and industrialisation have had on India. The peculiar effects of this industrialisation on women are now beginning to be studied by sociologists such as Duley and Edwards, who argue that:

> The cultural and economic forces of industrialization and Western imperialism interacted with the existing social order in ways that often increased stratification along gender (and class) lines.
>
> Colonialization ... introduced new patterns in the sexual division of labour such that in many instances more egalitarian relationships were replaced by the marginalization of women in political decision-making spheres, in access and control over resources, and in jural rights and privileges.[12]

These views are echoed in some of Markandaya's novels which show the West as a 'corrupting' force in Indian

society. Western women too, such as Lady Caroline Bell in Possession, and westernised Indian women such as Miss Mendoza in Two Virgins, are portrayed negatively. These characters tend to be direct antitheses of their more traditional Indian women counterparts. Caroline Bell, for example, belongs to a privileged, exploitative and oppressive class and her power is described as inherently evil: 'Whatever its manifestations - however excusable its manipulations, or well favoured the end - it would never be other than evil' (p. 184). Similarly, in Two Virgins, the Christian teacher Miss Mendoza is satirised because she introduces incongruous practices such as flute-playing and maypole-dancing in the village school. Her lofty endeavour to 'develop ... the character of the girls, especially the moral side' (p. 14), collapses when her star pupil, who masters these skills, is seduced by a film-director, falls pregnant, and leaves for an uncertain future in the city.

It could be argued that, in the bulk of her novels, Markandaya needs to present a negative picture of the West in order to provide a foil for a more affirmative view of Indian culture. Syd Harrex has argued just this, claiming: 'the sense of identity in her work is noticeably most affirmative in the "philosophical" rather than the "sociological" context, most positive after it has been

tested against English values and most vulnerable when confronted by internal Indian sociological adversities.'[13] Yet such a view denies the conscious ambiguity of her work, her refusal to endorse the manichean morality of simplistic nationalism. In The Coffer Dams for example Markandaya's, most self-consciously crafted novel,[14] the key character is an English woman who manages to break with convention and find spiritual fulfilment in her affair with a tribal Indian. The balance she achieves between social independence and spiritual harmony is an uneasy but significant one because it is something denied Markandaya's Indian heroines. In the world of Markandaya's novels, a world constructed within the ambit of Indian social mores, tradition and history, the Indian woman is necessarily constrained in her actions.

In Markandaya's oeuvre we see a general development from endorsing women's passivity to extolling their protest. Both these perspectives are analysed from a number of different angles revealing Markandaya's understanding of the social, historical and cultural factors that shape individual response. It is an understanding which has reached its culmination in in The Golden Honeycomb, one of Markandaya's most recent works. The complex narrative portrays, interrogates, and draws parallels between three forms of power: colonial rule,

caste privilege, and patriarchal domination. This engagement with the uses and abuses of power in every area of Indian life is a testament to the complexity of Markandaya's attempt to formulate what she has described as 'a literature of concern'.[15] Most literary critics have, I believe, elided or ignored this complexity. The following study aims to redress this imbalance.

Notes and References

1. On 'epic' see Charles Larson, The Novel in the Third World, pp. 131-51; comparison with Narayan see S. C. Harrex, 'A Sense of Identity: The Novels of Kamala Markandaya', p. 67; on Gandhian aspects see James Dale, 'Kamala Markandaya and the Outsider', in Individual and Community in Commonwealth Literature, edited by David Massa, p.190; and comparison with Desai see Meenakshi

Mukherjee, 'The Theme of Displacement in Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya'.

2. Jasbir Jain, 'The Novels of Kamala Markandaya', Indian Literature, pp. 36-43.

3. Dorothy Blair Shimer, 'Sociological Imagery in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya', p. 359.

4. In The Country and the City Raymond Williams has described how 'a retrospective radicalism against the crudeness and narrowness of a new moneyed order, is often made to do service as a critique of the capitalism of our own day: to carry humane feelings and yet ordinarily attach them to a pre-capitalist and therefore irrecoverable world.' (p. 36)

5. Nehru in The Discovery of India quoted in S.C. Harrex, 'The Historical Sense and the Commonwealth Writer', p. 150.

6. See Dorothy Blair Shimer, pp. 357-70.

7. Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, p. 24.

8. Quoted in S.C. Harrex, 'A Sense of Identity', p. 66.

9. The novels have been variously described as 'a saga of the triumph of human spirit', and a 'story of mythic proportions, an archetypal story of the loss of innocence', in, respectively the Indian PEN quoted on the book cover; Charles Larson, p. 151.

10. K.S.N. Rao, 'The Novels of Kamala Markandaya', Literature East and West, p. 215.

11. Larson, p. 134 ff.

12. Duley and Edwards, The Cross-Cultural Study of Women, pp. 48 and 53.

13. Harrex, p. 77.

14. In The Coffer Dams the machine dominates not only the lives of the characters but also controls the very language of the text: fractured, broken sentences, with split syntax and abrupt shifts in perspective, give a flickering, disjointed quality to the action, which is only broken by the stream-of-consciousness rendition of significantly 'spiritually whole' characters such as Helen and Bashiam.

15. D.B. Shimer, p. 358.

3

EPIC, COMEDY, TRAGEDY AND ROMANCE

Nectar in a Sieve (1955): An Epic of Rural India

Nectar in a Sieve is a short but substantial novel about rural life told from the perspective of a peasant woman, Rukmani. It describes her married years, during which she is torn between 'Hope and fear. Twin forces that tugged first in one direction and then in another' (p. 79), and skilfully brings home the way in which traditional faith strengthens the ability of those most vulnerable to face up to calamities. The novel describes, to paraphrase Raymond Williams, a rural society - unidealised, containing its own tensions - invaded and transformed by an uncomprehending and often brutal alien system.[1] In the process both the values and the limitations of rural society are recognised.

The novel opens with Rukmani relating how she still imagines her late husband returning to her despite the passage of time. She then looks back on her life from her childhood as the fourth daughter of the village headman (a man who before the control of the Zamindars, or landlords,

was of some consequence), to her marriage to a devoted tenant farmer, the birth of her seven children, and her eventual widowhood.

One critic, who clearly sees Markandaya as a popular novelist, has said that 'Nectar is a story of true love between Rukmani and Nathan uninterrupted by any tragedy'.[2] This despite the fact that a synopsis of the novel reads like a catalogue of calamities, as first the vagaries of the weather bring the family repeatedly close to starvation, and then the call of the city and the lack of money rob Rukmani, in different ways, of all but one of her children - her only other source of wealth apart from the land: two of her sons leave for work in Ceylon, another leaves to find employment as a servant in the city, another is killed when believed to be stealing, yet another dies of starvation during a drought, and her daughter - who returns home when abandoned by her husband who thinks her barren - turns to prostitution in the neighbouring town to earn much-needed money. The 'uncorrupted' child, Selvam, becomes an assistant to the English doctor, Kenny. All Rukmani's children abandon the land, which is constantly evoked as a source of sustenance, of strength, and of life itself. Towards the close of the novel Rukmani and her husband, Nathan, are themselves forced to travel to the city to seek financial

assistance from one of their sons. There they find themselves caught in another cycle of poverty as their son has disappeared without trace, and they are robbed of all their belongings and are forced to undertake gruelling work in a stone quarry to earn enough for the fare home. The novel ends after Nathan dies in the city of ill-health and overwork, and Rukmani returns, with a vagrant, leprous child she has adopted in the city, to her two remaining children and the land to which she belongs.

The novel is both a feminist and a nationalist work. Written in the first person, it complies with the first person realist narrative described by some feminist critics as 'ideologically appropriate to feminism; [as it is] a way of telling women's story for the first time in an undisguised voice'.[3] It not only constructs a picture of the world in which the female view and women's concerns have precedence but also gives an insight into a traditional woman's understanding of aspects of a patriarchal society - dowry systems, the importance of fertility of wives, women's seclusion, double moral standards. It is an insight, moreover, which emerges from what might be called an 'experienced' reality rather than a theoretical imposition of values which denies the complexity (and, indeed, the positive aspects) of tradition and its social consequences.

The novel is nationalist in that it paints a picture of a traditional India which is brought into sharp relief by the introduction of alien ways and urban values. This nationalist imperative is heightened by the form of the novel which retains many of the elements of the primary epic in poetry described by J.A. Cuddon. These include 'a central figure of heroic, even superhuman calibre, perilous journeys, various misadventures, a strong element of the supernatural, repetition of fairly long passages of narrative or dialogue, elaborate greetings, digressions ... and, in general a lofty tone; the tone of Classical tragedy'.[4] I begin my analysis of the novel with a study of its nationalist impulse through an analysis of its epic structure and then go on to identify its feminist characteristics.

Two Kinds of 'Epic': Kanthapura and Nectar in a Sieve

Both Rao's novel and Markandaya's first published work are often described as epics and parallels drawn between them.[5] Yet there are some important formal differences between the two works which help reveal the particular epic quality of Markandaya's text. In Kanthapura emphasis is laid on an oral tradition in the narrative. The text has the quality of a rambling spoken tale using a digressional method which Mukherjee has argued is 'part of

the Indian tradition used in the Panchatantra, Mahabharata [and] Ramayana'.[6] Written primarily in the present tense, it has a breathless fluidity, full of repetitions, digressions, invocations to the gods, songs, gossip, folk-tales and mythical allusions. Although it opens with a single, female, narrator, the character of this narrator is never fully realised - her personal story never told - and the text moves from character to character, scene to scene with an all-encompassing stream-of-conscious quality that draws on many voices and at times achieves a choral quality (Kanthapura, p. 10). The stress is on the communal rather than the individual voice: the construction of a subjectless universe which Lukacs has seen as a feature of the Homeric epics.[7]

This focus on the community is in keeping with the central theme of Kanthapura: the reverberations of a national movement as the impact of Gandhian thought is registered on a traditional village when one of his followers, Moorthi, carries Gandhi's philosophy into practice. The main source of conflict is a social one: the implementation of Gandhi's injunction to break down caste barriers, and raise the lot of the Pariahs, or Untouchables.[8] Its national importance was one the author was well aware of as he describes his aim in the Preface as one of relating a piece of 'legendary history' when

'some god or god-like creature' visited his village. The deification of Gandhi, and later of Moorthi himself, adheres to Lukacs' view of the epic hero who 'is, strictly speaking, never an individual. ... one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of the community'.[9]

Here we come to what I believe to be the major difference between the two works. In Nectar in a Sieve the focus is on the individual rather than the community; Markandaya's view is primarily humanist rather than didactic, her terrain morally flexible rather than manichean. One of the key examples of this is the differing treatment of foreigners in the two texts. In Markandaya's work, the English doctor Kenny remains an ambiguous figure ' a man half in shadow, half in light, defying knowledge' who, while devoted to his task of helping the villagers, is correspondingly exasperated by their backwardness, their '"follies and stupidities, [their] eternal, shameful poverty"' (p. 71). In Rao's novel, where the injunction to 'love thy enemy' is repeatedly made, the English sahibs are shown to be ruthless, barbaric and, in one case, an habitual rapist.

Furthermore, Nectar in a Sieve has none of the colloquial profusion of Rao's novel, and is instead

characterised by a lyrical restraint. The rhythm in Nectar is even and measured; the language archaic - almost Biblical - and rich in adjectives. Words such as 'beloved', 'bereft', 'grieve', 'sorely' (as in 'greatly'), 'throng', 'comely', and 'begone' carry a resonance that is played out fully in a text that has an archaic quality, and where the land is used as a metaphor for life. Imagery pertaining to the land and the natural world is fully integrated into the text. (Some examples of the latter are: 'Into the calm lake of our lives the first stone has been tossed' (p. 65); 'I tried frantically to keep it - I might as well have tried to imprison a cloud' (p. 89); 'when the river of our lives ran gently' (p. 102); 'her friendliness, her smile were like the sun on old limbs, gentle as the rain on parched earth' (p. 157); ' a memory, coiled away like a snake within its hole'. (p. 189))[10] Also the novels use mythic repetition - one of the elements of the epic -in different ways. Rao's work is repetitive in language (but progressive in plot development) whereas Markandaya's is repetitive in its temporal structure with cyclical time and the recurrence of episodes (but progressive in its development of character).

The novels are thus 'epics' of very different kinds. In his illuminating study of Lukacs' Theory of the Novel

J. M. Bernstein has drawn a comparison with Auerbach's theory that makes a distinction between two kinds of epic: the Biblical and the Homeric. Nectar in a Sieve shares many of the features of the Biblical epic whereas Kanthapura can be seen as more Homeric in form. Bernstein has argued:

> Auerbach's contrast between the Old Testament and Greek representations of reality is precisely that between a 'subjectivistic-perspectivistic procedure, creating a foreground and background, resulting in the present lying open to the depths of the past', and a style which 'knows only a foreground, only a uniformly objective present. According to Auerbach's analysis each Biblical personage possesses a background, each changes and progresses through the course of his life, and each is a multilayered personality. None of these things can be predicated of Homeric characters. [11]

In Markandaya's novel the emphasis is on the interaction between the central character and her environment; in Rao's work the environment itself is in the foreground, and the use of a seamless oral form and the present tense creates the sense of 'a uniformly objective present' described by Bernstein.

Rural Woman and the Topography of Suffering

The Biblical epic form has important repercussions on ~~the~~ the characterisation of women in the text, who are not often the central figures in epics Biblical or

otherwise. Unlike the Homeric epics which use 'detail' and 'digressions' as 'part of the story-teller's art...the pleasure...in telling', the biblical story subsumes detail into a 'message' that has a 'universal authority'.[12] Hence in Rao's work which is flat and uniform and where the narrator is subordinate to the characters she describes (and her gender only fleetingly evident through her occasional direct address to the reader as 'sister'), in Nectar in a Sieve both narrator and narrative are charged with a universal significance. The novel is a Bildungsroman [13] highly charged and well-paced, highlighting the peaks and troughs in the life of Rukmani; it is also the story of a dying village life. Written retrospectively and in the first person, the novel operates both as a personal testament of a peasant woman and as a portrait of an age and a community. Rukmani's idealism and naivety - evident from the beginning of the text when, as a child, she mistakenly believes that, though she is the fourth daughter in her family, her father's position as head of the village will secure her a good marriage and 'grand wedding' (p. 2) - and optimism, make the ensuing tragedies appear all the more enormous.

The tragedies are divided into two clearly defined categories: those that have a 'natural' cause, and those that are 'alien' to the understanding of Rukmani. The

distinction between what is natural and unnatural is not a simple one between as that between nature, and human interference and intervention. It is rather one that gains its strength through Markandaya's analysis of the rural perspective. For example, Rukmani accepts, albeit with difficulty, the brutal extraction of rent by the zamindars (landowners) because these are naturalised in her mind (pp. 6 and 73), but finds completely unacceptable the intrusion into village life by the tannery [14] and its urban, Muslim workers:

> 'They may live in our midst but I can never accept them, for they lay their hands upon us and we are all turned from tilling to barter, and hoard our silver since we cannot spend it, and see our children go without food that their children gorge, and it is only in the hope that one day things will be as they were that we have done these things.' (p. 28)

Rukmani's moral awareness is shown to be one that is drawn from the natural world, or land, where 'the sowing of the seed disciplines the body and the sprouting of the seed uplifts the spirit' (p. 104). Like her husband, she knows by instinct

> the ways of the earth: how to sow; to transplant ; to reap; to know the wholesome from the rotten, the unwelcome reed from the paddy; and how to irrigate or drain the terraces. (p. 63)

As a result her criticism is reserved for ways that lie outside her understanding as a rural woman. She accepts many of the traditional impediments faced by women, such as the necessity for a dowry (pp. 2 and 62) and a husband (p. 108) because they are natural to her world - a world in which the family provides a woman with security and status, and where spinsters such as Old Granny, who 'had no relatives left - no person on whom she had any claim' (p. 122) are left to die of starvation.

The emphasis on the moral significance of such a primal existence is never a mere abstraction however. Rukmani, a clearly defined character, operates as more than simply a mediating voice in the text. It is because Rukmani is such a sharply delineated individual that, as one critic has pointed out, we are able to understand her acceptance of some difficulties and rejection of others in terms of threats to her autonomy and individual 'identity' - 'As a victim of nature, the peasant has some chance of retaining his [sic] identity... but as a victim of modern society he is confronted by forces more intimidating to him than storm and drought because they are unfamiliar, outside his comprehension'.[15] Hence her comparison between her own way of life and that of the Muslim wives of the tannery workers not only operates in direct opposition to any easy stereotypes of the oppressed

peasant woman, but also actively works to personalise her perspective :

> Sometimes, when I caught sight of a figure in voluminous draperies swishing through the streets under the blazing sun, or a face peering through a window or shutter, I felt desperately sorry for them, deprived of the ordinary pleasures of knowing warm sun and cool breeze upon their flesh, of walking out light and free, or of mixing with men and working beside them. (pp. 47-48)

This is clearly not a novel of direct protest: Rukmani is far from being a spokeswoman for change. It is in the stark and painful contrast between the misfortunes she experiences and the fortitude she shows, that allows Markandaya to draw attention to the suffering of peasants whilst presenting them as human beings who hold their dignity. The recurrence of tragic events throughout the novel work to emphasise the enduring nature of certain difficulties. Rukmani's initial failure to bear male children, for example, finds mythic resonance in her daughter's apparent barrenness, where the fluctuations of fertility are paralleled by the unpredictable yield of the land. Both women feel they are a 'failure' (p. 50). Rukmani draws attention to the recurrence by recognising that 'the whole dreadful story was repeating itself, ... it was my daughter this time' (p. 50), but in her acceptance that 'we are all in God's hands' with only the doctor Kenny offering some thought of hope for her child,

Markandaya increases the disjunction between her suffering and her stoicism.

This stark polarisation between immense difficulties on the one hand and tremendous endurance on the other could be argued as contributing to an idealised picture of the peasant's perspective - something that some critics have accused Markandaya of.[16] However, it is in her very effort to present an accessible portrait of the rural mind that Markandaya comes close to deconstructing what Eurocentric critics might negatively describe as 'fatalism' and 'passivity'. Markandaya presents Rukmani's stoicism as more than just part of her nature - it is a perspective that is thoroughly rationalised in the novel, and one which I analyse in the next section.

Fatalism and Passivity: The Rural Woman's Perspective

Rukmani's stoicism is most evident in her 'fatalistic' comments and in her courageous acquiescence. When her daughter, Ira, is returned to her by her son-in-law because she has failed to conceive, Rukmani consoles Old Granny, the matchmaker who arranged the wedding: '[It is] no fault of yours, or the girl's or her husband's. ... It is Fate ' (p. 62). Reflecting that Old Granny, an elderly and abandoned spinster, has got used to eking out a

living by selling 'a few annas worth of nuts and vegetables' Rukmani continues:

> It is true, one gets used to anything. I had got used to the noise and the smell of the tannery; they no longer affected me. I had seen the slow, calm beauty of our village wilt in the blast from the town, and I grieved no more; so now I accepted the future and Ira's lot in it and thrust it from me; only sometimes when I was weak, or in my sleep while my will lay dormant, I found myself rebellious, protesting, rejecting, and no longer calm. (p. 62) [my emphasis]

It is clear here that protest is seen as a weakness rather than a strength. This is most evident in the altercations when Rukmani is forced to defend her outlook against, variously, Kenny and her sons. It is Kenny who, repeatedly frustrated by the villagers' passivity, provokes the clearest response:

> 'You must cry out if you want help. It is no use whatsoever to suffer in silence. Who will succour the drowning man if he does not clamour for his life?'
>
> 'It is said-', I began.
>
> 'Never mind what is said or what you have been told. There is no grandeur in want or in endurance.'
>
> Privately I thought, 'Well, and what if we gave in to our troubles at every step! We would be pitiable creatures indeed to be so weak, for is not man's spirit given to him to rise above his misfortunes? As for our wants, they are many and unfilled, for who is so rich or compassionate to supply them? Want is our companion from birth to death, familiar as the seasons or the earth, varying only in degree. What profit to bewail that which has always been and cannot change?' (p. 113)

Here, as elsewhere, Rukmani is acutely conscious of her powerlessness. Protest alone is not enough. It means nothing without the power to be heard, as Rukmani reflects:

> 'It is not enough to cry out, not sufficient to lay bare your woes and catalogue your needs; people have only to close their eyes and their ears, you cannot force them to see and to hear - or to answer your cries if they cannot and will not.' (p. 125)

Rukmani's dismissal of protest as a viable reaction to calamity is clearly consistent with her character, and is actively argued for in the text. Her love of traditional ways is coupled with an endearing naivety that cannot conceive of the point of protest: ' "Of what use to fight when the conclusion is known?" I asked myself and got no answer. I asked my husband and he was perplexed twice over ' (p. 65).

Her strength of character, resilience, and ability to adapt to change are not merely celebrated in the novel but reasoned out. Thus Markandaya's use of the epic form shirks sentimentality. The lyricism in the novel is contained, like the Biblical form, within a clear and consistent 'message'. The real tragedy that the text bears out is not merely that for the peasant woman protest appears like an ideological luxury, but that it is because

of the inhumanity and blindness of those in power that this is so.

A Silence of Desire (1960): A Comic Quest

In A Silence of Desire Markandaya uses four of the comic elements described by Merchant in his study of comedy: an imitation of common errors and human failings; an inversion of roles; a reversal of situations and the use of a social outcaste or clown figure as a spokesperson.[17] These elements are used to interrogate, break down and relativise essentialist cultural perspectives of an 'Eastern' spiritually-orientated way of thinking and a 'Western' belief in science and reason. But the novel seeks not so much to reconcile abstractions like 'East' and 'West' or 'Faith' and 'Reason' as to forge a cultural synthesis between two very real domains of Indian experience: the town and the village. The novel explores, through the character of Dandekar, the conflict between an urban sensibility that extols the virtues of science and rationality, and a traditional way of life whose priorities - including spiritual healing - challenge the authority of reason and exert a tremendous influence not just on the country but within the ostensibly modern and sophisticated urban context itself.

However in the following pages I will argue that while Markandaya uses comic elements to relativise essentialist

cultural perspectives, she subscribes to a static and idealised conception of gender. Women are shown to belong unequivocally to the world of tradition. They become idealised repositories of traditional values - figures whose inherent subjectivity gives them access to a realm of faith and spirituality that lies beyond the reach of an essentially 'male' rationality. Women are certainly presented positively in the novel, but the essentialist gender division serves also to deny them the capacity - or indeed the need - for protest. The result is a curiously fractured text - one that actively engages with cultural essentialism, yet comes to reimpose essentialism on the level of gender. I begin my study by analysing the way in which Markandaya breaks down cultural essentialism through describing an individual man's quest for unity. In my second section I study Markandaya's depiction of women, and in my final section analyse the ideological implications of this depiction.

Comedy of a Hero's Quest

A Silence of Desire describes the story of Dandekar, a routine-orientated and self-satisfied senior clerk with all the 'decent if unspectacular qualities of the average unassuming citizen' (p. 222), whose peace of mind is shattered when he finds that his wife, Sarojini, is

leaving their home in his absence. Suddenly all the office jokes about the unpredictable sexual desires of women, and of faithless wives, begin to seem less funny to him, as he begins to look for clues to his wife's activities, and even absconds from work to follow her around. His understandable anxieties are fuelled by the discovery of a photo of an unknown man in the family chest, and his wife's physical withdrawal from him. So the first half of the novel draws its humour from Dandekar's mistaken belief that his wife is having an affair, and his misplaced sense of moral and intellectual superiority over her.

When he finds out that the mystery figure his wife is visiting is in fact a swami - a faith-healer whom Sarojini believes will be able to cure her of a tumour in her womb - the tables are turned, and Dandekar finds that far from being the innocent party in a love-affair he is in fact guilty of neglect and jealousy. It is at this point that the reader's laughter at the hero's expense turns to close identification with him as Dandekar is shown to plunge into a personal dilemma - how to persuade his wife, who has no faith in modern science, to go to the hospital for an operation, and stop seeing the swami. Dandekar's many and various appeals - to his wife to go to hospital; to the hospital doctor to help him persuade his wife; to his boss to order the swami out of town; and to the swami

himself to leave - all serve a salutary function as he is forced to question not only the authenticity of the swami's powers and the reputability of the swami's intentions, but also his own capacity to accept his wife's decision. His inability to find any concrete evidence against the swami increases his dilemma.[18] By making it clear to the reader that Sarojini's condition is in fact not serious, Markandaya succeeds in keeping the emphasis of the novel on Dandekar's predicament as he walks the cultural tightrope between traditional faith and belief in modern science. The swami's protégé, a male dwarf, serves as a spokesperson for the novel's polemic - chastising Dandekar for his materialism and lack of vision. Yet the end of the novel is problematic, showing that, although Dandekar is enriched from his tussle with his own faith and conscience, he has lost the stable beliefs and certitudes that had earlier supported his sense of identity. In rejecting materialism - he carelessly kicks away those possessions, 'the dented silver vessels' his wife had offered the swami (p. 253) - he also rejects his past. This rejection is accompanied by an affirmation of love for his wife and daughters, certainly, but he has failed to find what he was looking for: a coherent spiritual centre comparable to the one that sustains his wife.

It is through analysing the comic elements in the novel that the reader can best become aware of the novel as an account of a failed quest. The elements of the quest are patently there, and increased by the fairy-tale aspect of the narrative. Many of those elements of the folktale described by Propp - a symbolic journey (in this case, over a river), an unusual helper (in the form of a dwarf), a revelatory experience (a purgatorial illness,described as shingles, but possibly venereal disease) - are worked into the text.[19] The polarised depiction of the Eastern and Western worlds, and the depiction of Dandekar torn between them, furthers this symbolic dimension. Mentally torn between two worlds, with a a 'part-Eastern' and 'part-Western' mind (p. 132), Dandekar is trying to resolve a conflict between reason and faith - two perspectives that normally in India 'existed, side by side without conflict' (p. 127).

This emphasis on Dandekar's quest has led some critics, such as Syd Harrex, to view the novel as a spiritual 'parable' which fails to deliver. His contradictory observations, which include the view that the novel ends 'with the suggestion that a definite compromise between the old and the new India is possible' [my emphasis] whilst conceding that 'the resolution...is a little contrived', are the direct result of such a

reading.[20] I would argue instead that in Silence Markandaya uses comic elements to describe the distance between aspiration and achievement and the contingency of truth through a narrative which has a deliberately inconclusive ending.

The crisis in the novel focuses on a choice that Dandekar has to make between faith and reason. Reason is repeatedly seen as an alien, Western phenomenon in the novel, not only by Sarojini and the swami but by Dandekar himself as his early altercation with his English boss reveals (p. 212). Yet it is also the only means of assessing the power of faith in the community. The crisis comes to a head when Chari, Dandekar's boss, does a survey to analyse the importance of the swami in the town with a view to ordering his removal. Here Markandaya's contextualism[21] forces the reader to view Dandekar's dilemma as having a wider significance, for, as the deputy at Dandekar's office points out, '"What happens here is a microcosm of all of India. You can't just dismiss it as a small-town happening "' (p. 236). The ensuing inquiry, carried out by Ghose, a Northerner who has little sympathy for the superstitions of southern India and is therefore an 'outsider', reveals the divisions that tear this sample town. The swami, it appears, has the support of the villagers but not of the townsmen, and, were he to leave,

there would be no room at the local hospital for the hundred or so sick people in his care.

The results of the report simply work to affirm the difference between two perspectives - the way of reason and the way of faith - espoused by two different sets of people. It does not solve Dandekar's dilemma - his search for a spiritual centre comparable to his wife's. One of the ways in which Markandaya maintains the disjunction between .. reason and faith is by relating events through Dandekar's perspective. We are never given immediate access to Sarojini's views. In the terms of one critic who has studied the '[male] romantic search for identity', Sarojini's role in the novel is one which has been denied subjectivity, and thus 'functions ... as an image of the 'lost' interior self of the male hero'.[22] Sarojini's silence therefore is both a necessary part of, and an impediment to, his own quest.

Those critics who prioritise the cultural aspects of the novel - seeing in it a tussle between two perspectives - stress the importance of the compromise achieved in the novel's conclusion. Syd Harrex, for example, has summarised the conclusion in the following way:

> Before leaving town the swami tells Sarojini that her faith is strong enough to ensure the success of surgery, and this proves to be so. Nevertheless, at

> the end both husband and wife have enlarged their understanding of human experience by becoming aware of the limitations of their respective approaches to life: Sarojini because she recognises that the fulfilment of faith may be dependent on practical action, and Dandekar because he is forced to acknowledge his debt to the swami and the swami's spiritual psychology.[23]

Yet this clear opposition between Faith and Reason, between Tradition and Modernity - an opposition embodied by Sarojini and Dandekar - is used not only to describe a reflection of a society in the state of transition, but also to describe an individual dilemma. The clear breakdown of the certainties of both realms is mediated through the text's comic elements: inversion, confusion, and chaos serve to relativise the meaning of events and present an amoral universe. Truth becomes contingent, not absolute. Dandekar's conflict with multiple realities fragments social facts - such as poverty - into multiple and contradictory interpretations.

Without doubt, this textual representation of the contingency of truth has a subversive result. Through it Markandaya succeeds in re-evaluating the obvious, puncturing illusion and undermining the imposition of simple, eternalised, ideological truths on a process of social transformation.

And yet Markandaya's exploration of the fluidity of meaning is restricted to the largely male-dominated social world. As will be seen, when it comes to the representation of women Markandaya's text resorts to an essentialist construction of female identity which seemingly deprives women not only of subjectivity but also of historical and social agency.

The Two Mysteries: Women and Religion

A Silence of Desire does not bear out any of the implications of feminist protest that its title might suggest. The word 'silence' - like the word 'shadow' - so often found in many titles of Indo-Anglian women's texts,[24] carries with it connotations of anxiety and protest questioning women's traditional role as quiet 'shadows' of their husbands. It is also a word that feminist theorists use in an analysis of linguistic hegemony: Deborah Cameron, for example, has argued that women have two ways of dealing with patriarchal language: alienation or silence.[25]

This novel draws upon the resources of comedy to celebrate the richness of women's silence and men's inability to address it. It is an affirmative portrayal of women, but one that draws upon cultural stereotypes.

Sarojini remains an unknown quantity at the centre of the text. She is the repository of spiritual awareness to which her husband tries to have access. Indeed women and spiritual faith are almost synonymous in the text making up the two mysteries that Dandekar tries to comprehend. Markandaya's early depiction of women is both celebratory and complacent. In this novel she suggests that women have considerable power and how real authority lies outside the controlled, materially and patriarchally-orientated public world. She does this by revealing the fragile basis for the social and moral certainties with which the (male) office clerks surround themselves:

> They talked about marriage now ... in general terms, with views that varied from Sastri's, who went to see films of Indian classical stories and held the benign belief that wives were faithful, virtuous creatures, prepared like their classical sisters to follow their husbands barefoot into the jungle, if necessary, to Joseph's, who believed in free love and was even said to practice it. There was a third view, a curious result of Western films, the strongest adherent of which was Mahdevan. He believed that no marriage was safe unless, in her husband's absences, a wife was locked in a chastity girdle. He was a bachelor. (p. 28)

Dandekar sits on the fence, believing that '"our women are not like that"' (p. 28), and that they would not be unfaithful because they have not the time (which was 'something he had not believed until two years ago when his wife fell ill, and by malevolent mischance, simultaneously, all their female relatives fell ill, and

he had to manage on his own ' (p. 29).) In this he reveals a lack of understanding of human - in particular women's - nature, which is the central source of humour in the first half of the book. When forced for example to question the developing desires of his own adolescent daughter and 'Mahdevan's view of the beast in adolescent girls', Dandekar is only able to say lamely: '" a well-brought -up girl from a respectable family isn't likely to - to- anyway there is not much opportunity is there?"' (p. 34). What is repeatedly established is the fact that women are, to the frustration of many men, including Dandekar, beyond complete male control. Eventually when Dandekar comes to believe that his wife is indeed having an affair, and that the office view that '"all women are the same. All harlots...their virtue lasts just as long as you watch them"', is true (p. 82), it brings shame upon him by its baselessness.

This is clearly part of the role-reversal that Merchant has described as an element of comedy. Whilst Dandekar is shown to be insecure and inept Sarojini is presented as a source of wisdom and stability in the novel, exerting a centripetal force to the text. Her ability to remember dates for example relies on old-fashioned means that are more dependable than her

urbanised husband's, and is a constant source of wonder to him:

> Her system was similar to Rajam's; and, indeed, common to all women he knew. Contemptuous of calendar dates, as men were contemptuous of them for it, they used feast days, birthdays and their children's illnesses as stepping-stones to arrive at the answer; and, infuriatingly, they were invariably right. (p. 24)

Much humour is gained from the ironic contrast between Dandekar's self-satisfied image of himself - in particular his delusion that he is sharper than his wife (p. 38) - and the authorial commentary that stresses his ineptitude: 'Dandekar did not think about it' (p. 25); 'Dandekar did not pause to analyse his pleasures' (p. 16).[26] The detachment inherent in this comic irony is paralleled by an increasing emphasis on the importance of faith over reason embodied by Sarojini's refusal to have an operation because '"she has no faith in it"' (p. 108).

Markandaya takes this identification between Sarojini and the spiritual world further by investing that world with female properties. Sarojini's illness, referred to as a 'growth in her womb', has symbolic resonances: it is not only endemically female but also secretive and hidden. What is more, her lack of faith in hospitals is substantiated by facts that involve female relatives: her

grandmother and mother both died of the same illness in hospital. The swami's following is primarily made up of women with 'womb trouble' (p. 235). It is an illness which is associated in the novel with a desecration, producing in its sufferers:

> "the worst kind of fear. Of castration. It's more than a loss of limb or function. It's destruction of divinity, the fraction that lives in a woman's body, a desecration and a blasphemy...they'd rather die than that." (p. 235).

Markandaya has clearly and quietly now invested women's physicality with divine properties.[27] It is not merely that women have, as Meena Shirwadkar has argued, a 'superior spiritual power',[28] rather that they are part of another 'higher' world that is separate from the world of men.

It could be argued that Markandaya is seeking to compensate urban women for their relative powerlessness in the public world by according her female characters special, near-divine, status. A Handful of Rice, another novel with an urban setting in which there is a discrepancy between the heroine's experiences at the hands of her violent and unpredictable husband, and her role as a moral guardian in the text, would appear to bear this theory out. Yet this depiction is one found in other work by Indian writers - including the early novels of Sahgal

- and seems to belong to the literary tradition of an ideal of womanhood upheld in Indo-Anglian fiction.29 What's more, in order to sustain this depiction of women as a repository of virtue, Markandaya needs to marginalise them in the action, and focus on the male point of view. Unlike Anita Desai's early novels, which also work from an understanding of gender difference but explores this from a culturally-critical perspective, Markandaya's early work sacrifices the analysis of women's oppression upon the altar of cultural affirmation. One of the effects of this is that women lie, curiously, both on the periphery and at the centre of the text, so becoming something of an absent centre in Markandaya's novels.

Hence while the novel successfully portrays the vibrant process of cultural and social reformulation that accompanies the emergence of a 'new India', its representation of women is paradoxically articulated through the static, eternalising and mythical categories of a tradition that belongs firmly in the India of old. In A Silence of Desire Markandaya dissolves moral certainties in the social realm, only to reimpose them in the realm of gender. Women in Markandaya's text subscribe to the static typologies of an ideal or 'myth' which, as Roland Barthes has pointed out, necessarily effaces the reality of the object it describes.[30] Women, in this context, are

removed from history. They become its subjects rather than its agents.

Feminism and Nationhood

What A Silence of Desire seems to call for is a balanced perspective on the cultural complexity of India, but what it prescribes for women is passivity and acceptance of the status quo. In her quest for synthesis and spiritual renewal, Markandaya invests her central female characters with a moral significance that denies them the power, or indeed the need, for protest. For meaning is shown to reside, less in Sarojini herself, than in the way Markandaya positions Sarojini as a reassuringly unchanging ideal on Dandekar's somewhat unstable mental landscape. This coincides with Marcuse's critique of the bourgeois concept of 'High Art' - a conception which offers "a world essentially different from the factual world of the daily struggle for existence, yet realisable by every individual for himself 'from within'". From this perspective, Markandaya's novel appears to present a world of 'authentic' values in opposition to the world of social utility.[31] Although nominally placed in a specific social and historical context, it points beyond that context to a realm of private, spiritual fulfilment which obviates the need for - or, indeed, the validity of - social and

political protest. Sarojini's concluding acceptance of the swami's decision to leave, marks a recognition of individual autonomy - '"It would be sinful to batter oneself to pieces because one refuses to recognize that another's life is his own If the Swami chose to go, it was his decision. One must accept it in good heart."' (p. 244) - that is notably lacking in Dandekar's ensuing reflection which makes no allowances for Sarojini's own impulses: 'He took her from me, he has given her back, and that is the heart of the matter.' (p. 245). The complete passivity of his wife who is deemed to be in the power of forces beyond her control could not have been more fully expressed.

In A Silence of Desire Markandaya furthers the argument against protest found in Nectar in a Sieve by stressing the gains that can be made by the abnegation of power. It is precisely in the individual's realisation that exercise of power is unworthy that produces the opportunity for postive social change. Dandekar's position in the course of the novel as someone who is no longer confident and is losing control over his life, is part of a complete role reversal that allows him to understand his own injustices towards his wife:

> This had happened before, he thought, this inquisition. But I was the inquisitor. I made her go through something like this, only a hundred times

> worse. How did she stand it? Can there be anything left between us after this kind of torture? (p. 106)

Markandaya's humanism, within the comic framework of a failed quest and role reversal, leads her to argue that it is only when power is relinquished that love is possible. Women are shown to exert an ennobling influence on men that silences their need for protest. In the next novel in my study, A Handful of Rice, Markandaya once again portrays a heroine who is the source of wisdom for the central male character. However, in this later novel Markandaya's preoccupation with economic conditioning is foregrounded, and she shows how the pursuit of material things is closely tied to the pursuit of power. I will show in my analysis of it how, through her use of a tragic template and concentration on the (male) desire for ownership, Markandaya's celebratory view of women's potential is altogether lost.

A Handful of Rice (1966): Tragedy, Protest and Despair

Markandaya's fifth novel is a bleak one. It describes the progressive erosion of ideals and hopes of Ravi, the son of a tenant farmer, who joins 'the exodus to the cities because [the] villages had nothing to offer them' only to find that 'the cities had nothing either' (p. 25). Having spent some months as a 'drifter' and 'loafer' in search of a job, he makes ends meet by trading in blackmarket goods. Eventually, having broken into a house for food, he falls in love with the daughter of the house, Nalini, marries her and becomes an apprentice to her father, a tailor. Here he finds the social niche he had hankered for, but the material stability he had hoped would accompany it is not forthcoming, as he increasingly finds that his earnings have to cover not just his immediate family's needs but those of the joint family whose presence he finds a constant source of irritation. His job as an apprentice tailor takes him into the homes of the wealthy whose lifestyle and belongings awe him. The discrepancy between his material hopes and the results, coupled with the added frustration of seeing his former partner in blackmarket goods become a very wealthy man, lead Ravi to neglect his duties. He works less, drinks more, and starts beating his wife, who doesn't understand

his 'vague dissatisfactions and frightening ambitions. Abstract ideas, such as Ravi had been so fond of airing, only made her confused and nervous' (p. 86). The novel ends when, during a period of inflated prices (when people such as his former partner in crime are making a huge profit), the masses raid a grain store. Ravi, part of the crowd, is at first uncertain, then gathers courage and joins in the general uprising. He is undaunted when beaten by a policeman but finds, when raising a brick in front of the expensive shops in which some of his work sells at inflated prices, that he cannot throw it.

The novel is a tragedy that describes both social protest and psychological despair. On a social level it describes the discrepancy between individual need and social necessity; on a personal level it analyses the psychological breakdown of an individual and the way this breakdown relates to the abuse of power. The novel thus observes the complex interrelationship between individual desire and social injunctions within a framework endemic to 'tragedy', which has been described by one critic as emphasising ' the interrelation of character and circumstance' and the close link between fate and fault.[32] Its penetrative insight into social ills, however, goes, as I will show, beyond the form of 'classical tragedy' and subscribes more precisely to the mode of 'tragic

emplotment', described by Hayden White in his study Metahistory. White has described this mode as one which 'eventuates in a vision of the...revelation of the nature of the forces opposing man'.[33] While Markandaya can, and does, explore the tragedy that engulfs her characters, she also explores the social and political circumstances that provide the cause or the context of that suffering, as well as the individual's complicity in his or her own downfall. In the following pages I argue that the novel describes more than just a story of individual despair, but rather embodies a particular historical vision that works to challenge the assumptions of Markandaya's largely middle-class readership.

I analyse Markandaya's treatment of 'the interrelation of character and circumstance' and mode of tragic emplotment focussing first on her depiction of a complex social organism and the universalism she ascribes to Ravi's dilemma; secondly on the way Markandaya's analysis of the interpenetration of social factors leads her to reveal the social dimension of male violence and finally on the conclusions, if any, that the narrative appears to direct the reader toward about social problems.

I argue that in A Handful of Rice the hero serves as a metaphor for social victimisation. In the novel the tragic

dimension is socialised, and instead of simply describing an 'error of judgment' on the part of a 'tragic hero', the text works to show how the flaw lies both within and outside himself. Through close identification with him, Markandaya is able to penetrate the surface of social ills and describe the complex relationship between desire and need, unemployment and crime, self-abnegation and violence. Her sympathetic observation of individual character operates within the context of a close analysis of the social and material co-ordinates of experience which, in turn, leads her to portray the economic basis of suffering and the particular way Indian women become its victims.

The Individual and Social Protest

A Handful of Rice embodies a powerful protest against an urban social system that ruthlessly crushes those who don't abide by the 'jungle law' 'where a man's strength and courage alone gave him mastery' (p. 33). Ravi is shown to be a rebel - actively rejecting 'the standards of his family ... for what had it taught them except an excessive endurance, and what had it brought them except perpetual poverty' (p. 33). He rebels against the established social order arguing that the rich are '"not made of different clay are they? There's nothing lays down

they should always have the best and trample over us and do us down"' (p. 75).

His material and social aspirations are contextualised so that Ravi himself becomes a symptom and a symbol of the times. The social backdrop to the action, for example, is one in which university graduates are seen dejected and unable to find work so that they had 'the look of no work: the common look' (p. 208) which the elementary-school educated Ravi comes to share: a 'sulky, unsatisfied scowl' which 'all the young men seemed to have stamped on their faces these days' (p. 91). Ravi himself, and his wife, are, like Dandekar in Silence, typicalised, when, for example, they are described through the eyes of a middle-class Indian doctor as having so much potential that they 'could be symbolic of a new India' (p. 189). Their story thus gains a universal dimension, and the closing pages of the novel, which show Ravi eventually succumbing to the new phenomenon of 'muscling in' (p. 198) but losing 'something vital like heart or spirit' (p. 235), and even the desire to rebel in the process, complete a tragic thrust which is both biographically-grounded and socially-orientated. Ravi, who at the beginning of the novel is a social migrant, has become demoralised, a casualty both of the conflicting desires to

better his lot and remain law-abiding, and of social change.

Whereas in Silence the hero walked a cultural tightrope, in A Handful of Rice the hero walks a moral tightrope between individual rebellion and acceptance of social expectations. In a society where the individual is categorised along strictly defined, inherited, lines - sex, class, caste, ethnicity, race and religion - resulting in 'a fixed sense of social placement' as one critic has put it.[34] Ravi is one of a new breed of outsiders, a migrant from the village who is capable of redefining the rules - but fails, as he tries to pursue a middle path between obeying social codes (his duties as a husband and son-in-law), and improving his lot.

In complete contrast to A Silence of Desire where ironic detachment is the key to the reader's appreciation of the hero's quest, A Handful of Rice is marked by a tragic thrust that negates the optimism of the earlier novel. This novel is a tragedy which offers not the poetic truth which Aristotle demanded, but historical insight. The social and historical contextualisation I have described, belongs to this latter concept of tragedy, epistemological rather than aesthetic, and constitutes a mode of social and political analysis which Markandaya

uses to great effect in the novel. It is a concept whose broad structure has been well described - albeit in a different context - by Biodun Jeyifo:

> ...when tragedy confronts history it is on solid ground and loses its abstract, 'artistic' purity; protagonist and antagonist forces are not agents who carry an ineluctable 'tragic flaw' which destroys them. Rather they are individuals who carry the concrete goals and aspirations of social groups, forces and classes.[35]

By frequently affirming Ravi's social typicality and placing this within a historical dimension, Markandaya's novel works to undermine the possibility of imposing on his actions ethical absolutes. Ravi's dilemma, as he is torn between meeting his material needs and fulfilling his social obligations, is set within the context of an increasing migration towards the cities; his physical displacement paralleled by a corresponding moral displacement. Further, by placing Ravi's social and moral marginality within the ambit of historical contingency Markandaya succeeds in extending her perception of moral ambiguity to embrace all events in the novel. The repeated depiction of police brutality in the novel is just one example of the moral malaise described, showing the extent to which those who are entrusted to protect certain ethical standards have themselves been corrupted.

The moral ambiguity in A Handful of Rice is carried through into the depiction of women and their corresponding role in the text. The two principal women in the novel, Nalini and Jayamma, Ravi's wife and mother-in-law respectively, paint seemingly antithetical pictures: the former a dismal, passive accepting victim; the latter a deviant, lustful figure. Yet, despite these obvious differences, both women are described in a morally ambiguous way. Nalini - in complete contrast to the quiet but strong figure of Sarojini in A Silence of Desire - is shown to be woefully compliant. Markandaya shows that Nalini's place as a moral arbiter is strictly conditional, deriving as it does from Ravi's idealism. (Whereas in Silence the central woman was presented as both the source, and the embodiment, of an undiscovered mystery, in A Handful of Rice the hero's wife is flattened out so that she becomes little more than the object of the hero's idealism - 'the distilled essence of all that was sweet and desirable in a woman' (p. 42) - and a constant reminder of his lapses - 'not that he was afraid of her: it was the look on her face he could not bear' (p. 192).) Her very passivity, as will be seen, is shown to be ignoble. In turn, Jayamma's cruelty and sadistic lust are shown to belong to a specifically urban social context: a context in which brutality and aggression hold sway so that even idealists such as Ravi succumb to it. Like him,

both women are shown to be psychological and moral casualties of their society.

The Psychology of Male Violence

In the novel Markandaya suggests the extent to which women might be responsible for their own oppression, as Nalini's passivity - which corresponds to the rural mentality that Ravi abhors - is shown to provoke her already despondent husband further:

> Before he had gone far...he became...concerned about his gin-smelling breath and the effect it would have on Nalini. She wouldn't say anything, he knew that. Sometimes he wished she would, then he would bawl her out. She would be silent, and refuse to meet his eyes, and this would make him want to hit her. Perhaps he had, he thought confusedly...and had to sit down. (p. 193)

However, violence against Nalini is shown to be more particularly the result of Ravi's mental state and the slow erosion of his spiritual reserves. Such violence, which eventually culminates in the rape of his mother-in-law, is part of the 'jungle law' to which Ravi, unable to find any alternative in the city, succumbs. As in Silence there is an effective contrast between a man's protest and a woman's passivity, but here the identification with a single viewpoint (the hero's) is set within a broader tragic perspective: a perspective inimical to what Wilson

Harris has described as the 'remarkable and intense personal centre of depth' required by the tragic vision.[36]

Yet Markandaya reappropriates the emotive power of tragedy to a political, and as will be seen, a nationalist strategy - a strategy which tethers the personal dimension of a representative victim to a historically and materially grounded social realm. Take for example the episode in which Ravi and Nalini see the stealing by one brother-in-law very differently. Ravi's perspective is shown to emanate from a social context of impoverishment and harassment which is, in turn, shown to be endemic in rural India:

> He had no sense of moral outrage, no feeling of inner damage, or damage to some abstract standard that she seemed to hold, and which the elders of his village had been so fond of brandishing at him and his friends. Who had been the sinners, though: those who had kept their standards and sacrificed their families, or those who went out to grab what they could? Ravi felt he knew the answer, he had never had any doubt from the moment he had shaken the dust of the village from his feet and even before. (p. 177)

This historical and political perspective is generated from a socially-orientated conception of tragedy. Markandaya's novel undermines the fatalism, the general predetermination of individual destiny, that underpins the classical conception of Tragedy. This fatalism is described well by Jean Anouilh:

> In a tragedy, nothing is in doubt and everyone's destiny known. ... Tragedy is restful; and the reason is that hope, that foul, deceitful thing, has no part in it. You're trapped. The whole sky has fallen on you, and all you can do about it is to shout.[37]

By tethering her vision of the tragic to history, Markandaya replaces fate with contingency. Far from being inevitable, individual destiny becomes - in large part - a matter of both personal choice and historical circumstance. It is not given but created. The static structure of classical tragedy gives way to the fluidity of history, with human agency replacing the unchallengeable force of metaphysical predetermination.

This is not to deny the compelling portrayal of the powerful forces that work to determine the course of Ravi's life. Rather it is to point out that Markandaya recognises the complex interaction of psychological and social determinants that structure his experience. The question Ravi's violence provokes is not, 'at what point does the understandable need for self-determination collapse into the less sanctionable desire to control others?'; but rather, 'what are the psychological and social factors that contribute to his dilemma?'. The first question is one that operates in the morally-constrained world of classical tragedy; the latter in the morally-ambiguous world of a historically-orientated tragedy.

In the process of describing the multiple social co-ordinates of Ravi's experience, Markandaya pays particular attention to his financial worries. Through her analysis of the relationship between the individual's basic material needs and his desire for self-improvement, Markandaya comes to describe the social and material underpinning of male violence. As will be seen, Ravi's increasing inhumanity against his wife and child - shockingly ignored by the critic who contends that 'A Handful...affirms the ennobling influence of love. The love of Ravi and Nalini remains unaffected by even dire poverty'[38] - is closely linked with his materialism.

It is through an analysis of Markandaya's treatment of materialism that one can see the careful balance that she maintains in her novel by emphasising , on the one hand, Ravi's material needs and on the other, his material desires. As an outsider, Ravi is shown to be both an economic victim and a psychological casualty of an impersonal organism or system - what is described ubiquitously as 'society' in Two Virgins (p. 145). His moral demise is thus more than simply the result of psychological degeneracy or loss of personal ideals. It is the outcome of specific social and economic factors. By relating Ravi's psychological and social decline firmly to his financial worries Markandaya is able to demonstrate

that, since his experience is in part subject to material contingency, so it is also capable of being changed.

The Dynamics of Power

In this novel Markandaya explores the relationship between economic security and power. The power struggle is most evident to those on the fringes of society. Ravi, a rural migrant who stands outside urban categories of identity, has a simple and easily understandable desire - to gain both social and economic security. And yet Markandaya, while careful to describe the social basis of Ravi's desire ('He had never before had a room of his own. Long witness of his father's land-hunger, the stony deprivation of his years in the city, had wreaked their own peculiar havoc; and desire for possession, whether of land or bricks and mortar, was like a fever a lust in his blood ' (pp. 121-2)), goes far further in her political objectives.

She consistently draws attention to the gulf of understanding between rich and poor which leads to the indifference of the former towards those on the margins of society. Mediated through the vagrant Ravi's perspective, the inhumanity of the wealthy gains a particular poignancy. Through such mediation she is able to direct

a share of condemnation at her middle-class readership whilst remaining true to the 'tragic' enterprise of describing an individual's downfall:

> They...took it for granted that people like himself were without feelings; that they could be surrounded by riches like this without ever seeking to possess a part; could handle the rich cloths, work on them and fashion them into beauty, and then hand them over dumbly, as if one had no desires... (p. 193)

> The cost of just one of those motor-cars that purred along the Marina, he felt, would keep him and his family over half a lifetime. How, he wondered...did anyone ever earn so much? He never would, not if he sewed a dozen shirts in a dozen hours every day of the week for a dozen years! (p. 134)

Thus Markandaya's novel does much more than show how social injunctions and self-gain are in contention for the new city-dweller - more than merely describe how Ravi's 'respectable' and 'womanish'(p. 67) job as a tailor's apprentice offers him no financial security, no escape from the pressures of a joint family and is inadequate for the needs of a married man. By describing a hard-working tailor's view of the wealthy, she implicitly targets the car-owning, financially-secure, middle-class Indian minority for censure.

This combination of social and historical placement and commitment to the analysis of character is a feature that A Handful of Rice shares with Nectar in a Sieve and A

Silence of Desire. Yet the generic differences between these three novels reveal a fundamental shift in emphasis in Markandaya's work. In Nectar Markandaya uses the form of the Biblical epic to reveal the largely static - and morally stable - perspective of Rukmani as she perceives with fear and considerable regret the transformation of her community. In Silence Markandaya uses elements of comedy to relativise absolutist perceptions, and undermine the concept of a morally stable society. Now it appears that in a A Handful of Rice Markandaya uses the tragic form not only to make an illuminating psychological study of a socially marginalised character, and to reveal moral ambiguity, but also to voice protest at a social system that makes violence the principal means of survival. Whereas in Nectar violence and the desire for power are shown to be the characteristic of the weaker individual and are an 'alien' feature to Rukmani's mental landscape, in A Handful of Rice these elements, contained within a tragic form, are shown to carry a certain inevitability.

A Handful of Rice is clearly a novel of protest against a brutal system which itself brutalises. The novel opens with a depiction of the oppressiveness of one institution of power which is feared by Ravi - the police, later described as 'men who became devils when they put on their uniforms' (p. 124). It is after running away from a

policeman that Ravi breaks into the home of his future father-in-law and delights in ordering the terrified household around. The two episodes are shown to be linked:

> He finished, blotting up the last crumbs with a wet thumb; wondered whether he should call for more , just to save the feeling of power ...
>
> He felt commanding, conscious of dominion: this was what they felt like, the people who said 'Hey, you!', who gave orders and expected you to jump to it, who had money, who had power, who did the pushing around. Well, tonight he would do the pushing. (p. 7)

Ravi's fear of the police is based not only on his criminal dealings in the blackmarket, but on his experience of the abuse of power when he was a victim of police brutality. Such police brutality is also featured in Saghal's novel Rich Like Us. But whereas for Sahgal police brutality constitutes a symbolic evil - a destruction of an ethical standard - which physically cripples but does not morally maim a villager, for Markandaya it is seen as a symptom of a broad social instability and a loss of values that, since it permeates society, threatens to affect all individuals. Whilst Saghal interrogates contemporary social problems from the perspective of an idealised historical past and from a fixed political ideal, Markandaya interrogates them from a material basis and presents a degree of moral ambiguity that is lacking in Saghal's fiction.[39]

It is significant that Markandaya explores materialism and the pursuit of power as problems that emanate from within contemporary Indian society, for there is a tendency in Markandaya's other work to ascribe these problems to western origins. In both Nectar in a Sieve and Two Virgins she shows the lust for money as an attribute of the westernised city. What's more, Ravi's single-mindedness is a feature that Markandaya more usually invests in her Western characters - the lustful Caroline Bell in her previous published novel, Possession, and Howard Clinton , the work-orientated builder who rapes his wife, in The Coffer Dams. The correlation between materialism and sexual domination is tortuously worked out in Possession, where Markandaya resorts to a tiresomely predictable series of analogies to describe the relationship between sex and 'possession' with occasionally jarring results.[40] In A Handful of Rice, however, the correspondence between materialism and sexual domination gains both urgency and power as it is played out within a specifically Indian social context. The references to Ravi's desire to 'possess' his wife are contained within the context of a narrative that explores in detail his hankering for money on the one hand, and his desire to meet his social obligations on the other: his need to get away from the physical and economic constraints of the joint family is shown to be countered

by his sense of obligation to and his dependence upon them.

The correlation between material ownership and the ownership, through control, of others is an important one for feminists. In her illuminating study of rape, Susan Brownmiller has argued that the male possession of the female may well be seen as the precursor to other forms of ownership:

> As the first permanent acquisition of man, his first piece of real property, woman was, in fact,the original building block, the cornerstone, of the "house of the father". Man's forcible extension of his boundaries to his mate and later to their offspring was the beginning of his concept of ownership.[41]

This is a view supported by Gerda Lerner, whose study, The Creation of Patriarchy is based on the hypothesis that:

> The appropriation by men of women's sexual and reproductive capacity occurred prior to the formation of private property and class society. Its commodification lies, in fact, at the foundation of private property.[42]

Yet although A Handful of Rice powerfully dramatises this correlation between materialism and sexual domination, it does so within the context of class rather than of patriarchy. The lust for power and domination is

shown not to be the exclusive interest of a man. Jayamma, Ravi's future mother-in-law, beats him indiscriminately and, on reflection, is concerned to find that she enjoyed doing it: 'what really troubled her was the lust that had risen in her like a tide, the surging exaltation that glutted her as she felt her blows falling on his flesh' (p. 55). By describing Ravi's violence against his wife and child (p. 137) and that of the lustful Jayamma's in similar ways, Markandaya makes a linguistic correlation between these incidents of violence that reinforces the view that violence and the desire for sexual domination are formed not simply within a patriarchal context, but within a social context that marginalises and takes away the power of independent action of the poor, thereby brutalising them.

The oppression of women is securely placed within this context of class and economic oppression. This is even evident in the description of Ravi's resentment of Jayamma, whom he later rapes. The sexist nominalisation of her as a 'bitch' is translated into terms that describe his sense of class inferiority:

> The trouble with her, blasted bitch, he thought angrily as his breath returned, was that she never bothered to control her passions, just let rip as if she were a memsahib. (p. 108)

The primacy that Markandaya gives to class and economic oppression over sexual oppression is evident in some of her other novels too. For example in those instances where another form of sexual ownership of women apart from rape - prostitution - is presented in her novels it is either relatedto a woman's poverty (Nectar in a Sieve (pp. 94-97) or described as a vehicle for self-analysis on the part of financially-drained man, (A Silence of Desire (pp. 124-125). It is not until Two Virgins that Markandaya comes to sift through the various forms of female oppression and reveal the complexity of their causes.

Hayden White has described the historical vision of tragedy as one that portrays the 'resignations of men to the conditions under which they must labor in the world. These conditions ... are asserted to be inalterable and eternal, and the implication is that man cannot change them but must work within them. They set the limits on what may be aspired to and what may be legitimately aimed at in the quest for security and sanity in the world.'[43] The emplotment of the novel, which follows Ravi's feeling of being trapped in a system he is powerless to change, fits firmly within this conception of tragedy. But by focussing on the material basis of Ravi's problem, and drawing attention to the inhumanity of the monied minority, Markandaya directs her readers to the

possibility of redemption. However, the position of women in the novel remains rather more complex. Shown to be financially dependent upon their husbands, it seems that they must either submit to the violence society engenders, as Nalini does, or become part of it, like Jayamma. It could be argued that both Nalini and Jayamma are in some ways the ultimate tragic victims as their stories, described rather than narrated, are denied the heroic dimensions of Ravi's experience.

In Markandaya's next published work the complex operation of systems of power are evident not only in the novel itself, but also in the response it elicited from its audience. The subject of Two Virgins is sexuality, which Michel Foucault has described as 'an especially dense transfer point for relations of power'.[44] As will be seen, Markandaya's treatment of this subject is one that is divided between a concern for subscribing to the demands of a conventional 'romance' and one that, for the first time in her work, offers a powerful feminist perspective.

Two Virgins (1973): Romance and Female Sexuality

Two Virgins is Markandaya's most controversial novel to date. Critical appraisals of it have been significant less for their penetrative analysis than for their diverse evaluations of the novel's worth. It has been described by one critic as a sensitive study of girlhood which 'dwells movingly on the nature of woman's condition'. Another critic, however, has dismissed the novel as a 'pot-boiler' and yet another as 'pornographic' - views apparently shared by the authorities who withdrew the novel from the literature syllabus of Madras University a few years after publication on the grounds that it is '"full of obscene references likely to pollute the young mind"'. Within weeks sales of the new paperback edition soared.[45]

How is it that a single text can generate such polarised responses? It appears that critics are responding to different elements in the novel. On the one hand it is seen to subscribe to the formal conventions of popular romances which, in Gillian Beer's words, 'batten on the emotionally impoverished'.[46] On the other hand it is seen as a serious Bildungsroman tracing the heroine's evolution from childhood to adulthood. I will analyse the evidence for each of these interpretations in the first

two sections of this chapter, arguing that while elements of the popular romance are undoubtedly - and often obviously - present, there is a far more complex conception of romance at work in the novel: that is, a conception of romance which Northrop Frye has defined as a quest for individual spiritual identity.[47] In my final section I will demonstrate how the two romance forms work against each other, how the codes of metaphysical romance undermine and problèmatise the elements of popular romance to produce a narrative representation of the confusion and pain associated with a child's introduction into the world of adult - and adulterated - sexuality.

The novel tells the story of two adolescent sisters whose response to their awakening sexuality conditions the future course of their lives. Lalitha, the older of the two, is pretty, precocious, and very aware that her physical attributes can, with a trained demureness, win her a lot of attention. Saroja, who is a little younger, is by contrast idealistic, respectful of tradition, and, in her own eyes, plain. Events in the novel, which focus on Lalitha's seduction by a film-director, her subsequent abortion and her final absorption into the city, are related from Saroja's point of view. Village life, with its close community and seasonal rhythms, provides the informing background to these events.

The Popular Romance and Allegory

Two Virgins uses numerous conventions associated with popular romantic fiction with its primary focus on the experience of falling in love. The elements of the 'ideal' romance have been described by Janice Radway in her study of the genre. Those elements relevant to Two Virgins can be summarised as follows:

1) the depiction of a spirited heroine (Saroja) whose personality and activities contain 'traits and behavior usually identified with men' whilst at the same time portraying some of the nurturing qualities usually associated with women;

2) the use of a female foil (Lalitha) whose 'misbehavior is always explained away by her later destruction';

3) an 'ideology of romance' which shows that 'female sexual response is something to be exchanged for love and used only in its service' (an underlying assumption in some of Saroja's reflections on her sister's pregnancy).[48]

Saroja clearly embodies many of the qualities of the ideal romantic heroine, in particular the quality which Radway defines as 'boyish independence'.[49] Lively and outgoing, she doesn't mind getting muddy when collecting the buffalo and enjoys cycling to school. Such boyishness

also constitutes an implicit reaction on Saroja's part against some of the restrictions, such as different dress, which society imposes on maturing girls:

> There was a davani...these days, it went on top of her blouse. She had to wear it, her breasts were sprouting. The davani was draped over them in gathers and folds, she supposed to stop them sticking out too much, calling attention to her burgeoning state. Amma said it was for decorum. Saroja found it a thundering nuisance, especially mounted on her bike. (p. 129)

Radway has argued that this independent spirit can be interpreted as 'a symbolic representation of a young girl's journey toward individuation and subsequent connection'. But the ideal heroine must combine an independent spirit with other defining qualities. She must be 'unusually compassionate, kind and understanding'; she must be 'characterized by childlike innocence and inexperience' ; and she must desire to recover a 'primary love' similar to that shared with her mother.[50] Saroja not only demonstrates all these qualities, but they are amplified by her child-woman status. Deeply attached to her mother, she is shown to have an instinctive love of animals and a 'gift for getting round babies and buffalos ... Manikkam's wife said it was miraculous' (p.69).[51] She also displays a generous - almost naive - acceptance of the many slights Lalitha, her sister, directs at her.

Saroja's perspective on the world around her is filtered through a romantic sensibility. She is shown to be a dreamer and an idealist who creates for herself an 'ideal world' 'which was secret, and separate, and chugged along quietly beside her ready for her to step into when she wanted' and which sometimes 'became a round perfect orb which nothing from outside could penetrate'(pp. 53-54). Hers is a romantic imagination where desire and lack of contact make of Devraj, the film director's assistant, an exalted hero:

> She kept her eyes fixed on the seawater floor, from which his limbs rose like some ocean god's. They were clad in a foamy white dhoti. The molding, the power of those legs was visible through the muslin. As far as the knee, as far as the eye could see. Eyelids down, that was the field of your roving eyeballs. (p. 203)

As in the ideal romance where 'the heroine's sexual innocence, unselfconscious beauty, and desire for love are contrasted ... with the female foil's self-interested pursuit of a comfortable social position',[52] so in Two Virgins Lalitha is shown, in contrast to her sister, to be wilful, daring, egotistical - and in quest of a style of life associated with the city élite in general, and film stars in particular.[53] Lalitha also displays elements of the sexual licence which Radway identifies in the ideal female foil who 'because she views men as little more

than tools for her own aggrandizement ... is perfectly willing to manipulate them by flaunting her sexual availability'.[54] Lalitha, too, is aware that being pretty wins her admiration and accords her 'status' (p. 13). She flaunts her physical charms and flirts with all men, including Gupta, Lachu the village paedophile, and indeed her own doting father. Saroja diagnoses Lalitha's flirting as a habit: 'she had become so accustomed to using her eyes she had become indiscriminate' (p. 125).

Clearly, then, Two Virgins contains numerous elements of the ideal romance as defined by Radway. But it is in no way reducible to these elements, as certain critics seem to suggest. On the contrary, I shall argue that the elements of popular romance form no more than the surface of a complex social and psychological representation of certain kinds of female experience.[55] This representation operates within the codes, not of popular romance, but of what Northrop Frye and others have defined as the quest romance.

Northrop Frye has described the romance as 'the structural core of all fiction: being directly descended from folktale, it brings us closer than any other aspect of literature to the sense of fiction, considered as a whole, as the epic of the creature, man's vision of his

own life as quest'. The romance as quest is directly related with the concept of an individual's growth towards self-understanding and identity for, as Frye goes on to argue, 'reality' in the romance is 'an order of existence most readily associated with the word identity'.[56]

In the following analysis of Two Virgins I shall use Frye's formal typologies to identify the elements of quest romance within the novel. However, the meaning of those elements, their ideological significance, will be seen to lie outside the spiritual and theological context beyond which - according to Frye's definition - true quest romance must never stray. Markandaya's novel is set firmly within the social world: the quest for identity is mediated through the clash, not of abstract conceptions of Good and Evil, but of competing social and political interests.[57]

This is most evident in the novel's use of character. While Saroja and Lalitha conform respectively to the Ideal Heroine and the Female Foil, they also represent the antagonism between the Village, with its traditions and certitudes, and the City, with its apparent chaos, atomisation and soullessness.

Markandaya's text is clearly an indictment of the city - the site of moral degeneracy in several of her novels. This concern places Two Virgins into that tradition of post-Independence fiction which deals with the effects of modernity on the ways of traditional India.

Lalitha is shown to have an artificial, corrupted awareness which is foreign to the rural milieu. To her the village is no more than a 'one-horse town, this backward place, this outpost of civilisation' (p. 84). This rejection of the village becomes, in the novel's terms, a rejection of the natural in favour of artifice, of sincerity in favour of selfishness. What Lalitha has gained by nature - her beauty - evolves into her means of manipulating others in the pursuit of material ends:

> Lalitha was demure, pressed her delicate feet together and cast down her eyes to show off her lashes, which were long and lustrous. Saroja knew it was for show because Lalitha told her. It was a pity, she said, that Saroja had such an insignificant fringe, since a lot could be done with sweeping eyelashes. (p. 13)

Lalitha herself so understands artifice that she is quick to recognise and exploit the potential elision between actuality and appearance, as for example when she uses deception to win a prize for doing good deeds that she has never actually done (p. 167). Lalitha is shown to embody an exploitative quality that she shares in common with

other characters who despise village life. Hence the ironic description of Mr Gupta, the film director who describes himself as a citizen of the world 'although clearly villages were not a part of the world of which he was a citizen' (p. 108). Typically he proceeds to make a 'documentary' on village life that shows Lalitha posing 'gracefully beside the well to which she hardly ever went' (p. 105). Miss Mendoza, another alien presence in the village, displays somewhat comical social pretensions. She is not only a Christian, but also a Bachelor of Arts and a spinster - 'but the Bachelor took away some of the shame of that' (p. 33).

The novel also problematises and undermines what Janet Radway has called an 'ideology of romance' which regards 'female sexual response [as] something to be exchanged for love and used only in its service'.[58] Saroja's romantic imagination, her view that 'the star you were born under had to be in harmony with your husband's' (p. 205), collapses into purely sexual longing when she defines the source of her attraction to Devraj:

> Saroja wondered about Mr Gupta's and Lalitha's stars, if they were in harmony. Judging from the ructions she decided they could not possibly be. Whereas hers and Devraj's , she was convinced, were. Only you couldn't, of course, ask a man about his star. Such questions weren't put until there were intentions. There were absolutely none where Saroja and Devraj

were concerned. No respectable intentions, which were tied up with marriage. (pp. 205-6)

Thus whilst the novel's formal properties conform to many of the prerequisites of the popular romance - binary characters, a stereotyped foil and accessible narrative style - the novel's ideological thrust, embodied in the form of quest romance, works to undermine a fundamental principle of the popular romance that marriage is 'a good thing' for women.

Markandaya's use of the quest romance provides her with a means of representing the awakening of a child's sexuality from a child's point of view. It is within this context that Markandaya's controversial use of explicit sexual descriptions - involving Lalitha's masturbation, for example - must be understood. Far from sex in the novel being 'abundant but rather pointless',[59] it constitutes an essential element in the novel's central theme of a girl coming to terms with her own sexual awakening and the peculiar rituals and impulses of adulthood.

The 'Quest' Romance and Sexual Discourse

The critic Charles Larson has come closest to identifying the relationship of Two Virgins with the quest

romance - although he doesn't actually invoke the quest romance form. He describes the novel as 'an archetypal story of the loss of innocence. It embodies a journey, a going forth, and a return'. Larson also makes a distinction that those who view the novel as a popular romance have failed to make, namely, that it is 'much more the story of [Saroja's] slow growth of rational awareness of the sexual part of our lives than of Lalitha's abrupt initiation'.[60]

Markandaya's representation of sexuality bears deeper analysis, however, because through it she articulates both the quest for personal affirmation and an understanding that, while the materialism and amorality of the city breeds particular forms of sexual oppression, the village too is a site for the sexual subjugation and abuse of women.

In terms of Saroja's sexual awakening, then, Markandaya seeks to distinguish between what is 'natural' and what is 'unnatural' to the character's understanding. For example, some of the biological and physical aspects of sex are all too familiar to Saroja: the lack of privacy in a tiny house means that nudity (p. 12) and the sound of her parents' lovemaking (p. 24) are common occurrences. Saroja's perspective - that is, the uncritical perspective

of a child - renders the direct and often explicit depictions of sexual contact into a curious though somewhat matter-of-fact phenomenon. This perspective is in turn contextualised by a rural milieu with its immediacy of contact to the physical realities of procreation. Through Saroja, we are permitted an insight into that relatively free and uninhibited expression of sexuality which Foucault has identified as typical of rural societies.[61] And, in so far as Saroja's own sexual awakening is set within the context of these unrationalised external manifestations of sexuality, she comes also to to embody a self-expressive sexuality which defines itself against the institutionalised, reductionist and controlling discourses of sexuality which Foucault identifies as key elements in the sexual and political subjugation of both adolescents and women.[62]

Problems arise when Saroja discovers that, whilst some things are known to her, others are barred, and that 'what happened between men and women was so subtle, so full of half hints and mysteries you could never tell how you knew what you knew' (p. 50). As Larson has pointed out, it is in the development of Saroja's 'rational awareness of the sexual part of our lives', or, in Foucault's terms, in 'the discourse of sexuality' - the secretive discussions with her older sister and schoolmates, the contact with

other members of the village community, in particular, the wife of Manikkam, the milkman, and Lachu, the lecherous drifter - that divides Saroja's understanding between a functional view of sex, and sex as an untold mystery or, in Foucault's words, 'a secret that had to be discovered'.[63]

These different views of sex form competing ideologies that have been described by Michel Foucault in the the first volume of The History of Sexuality. Foucault has drawn attention to the inscription of sexuality into 'a multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions'.[64] The discourses described by Foucault include erotic art, pedagogic science and confession. In Two Virgins all these forms of discourse emerge - the erotic, the pragmatic/ functional, and the psychoanalytic. These form essential, and necessarily conflicting, parts of Saroja's personal 'quest'.

By weaving Saroja's physical development and increasing sexual awareness through multiple discursive and social influences, Markandaya is able to raise broader issues of female sexuality and oppression. Two particular forms of such oppression are powerfully represented in the characters of Manikkam's wife and Lachu - the one a victim

of her own sexuality, the other a man whose sexual perversity becomes an active threat to the women of the village.

Manikkam's wife, a wet-nurse whose fertility, like that of the cows she tends, is effectively her means of livelihood ('Sell it, Manikkam's wife corrected her, and her eyes became narrow: I sell it, dear ' (p. 6)) has, unsurprisingly, a pragmatic view of sexual intercourse. It is through contact with Manikkam's wife that Saroja learns of miscarriage (p. 149) and with Manikkam that of birth control-'the sources of such information were not her parents' (p. 143).

However, Saroja finds that such a pragmatic view does not answer her curiosity about what the experience of sex is like for a woman, and only has Manikkam's crude statements to go by:

> She longed to know what it was like for Amma, who was constructed like her, same openings only larger, Manikkam's wife told her, because of the babies pushing out, not to mention what was pushed in. (p. 25)

It is the functional view of sex that most openly presents a bleak picture of the lot of women. Manikkam's wife - who significantly is never named in any other way in the

novel - introduces the lot of all women as woeful after her miscarriage:

> It's alright, said Manikkam's wife. She was lying by the wall, her feet were up in a sling in which her infant usually slept. The raw warm salty smell came from her most strongly, it also rose from a bundle in the corner. Its's nothing, she said to Saroja, nothing you shouldn't see, you're a woman too, aren't you, one of the tribe.
>
> ...It's just a little blood... A woman gets used to it. All women. (p. 149)

This negative view is reiterated by Saroja's widowed aunt, who being without a husband lacks 'status' (p. 13), calls herself 'less than dust' (p. 29), and argues that 'women were born to suffer, which Saroja did not want to believe being a woman herself' (p. 172).

If Saroja finds the functional view of sex inadequate, she finds Lachu's exhibitionism and perverse desires 'grotesque' (p. 43). They go beyond the customary nudity of men such as Chingleput, whom she sees changing:

> He did not mind anything that Saroja saw. Saroja did not either, it was ordinary and natural, but it frightened her to look at what Lachu deliberately displayed, besides he seemed to foam when he showed it. (p. 43)

Lachu's paedophilic urges present the threat of physical assault to all the schoolgirls, and provokes Saroja to even more bewildering and disturbing speculation:

> Sometimes he lurked behind the bushes , and this was worse than knowing he was there ... Jaya said what terrible things those fingers could do if they reached up your skirts. Saroja closed up her thighs and asked what exactly, but Jaya only said it was not to be described. (p. 19)

This fear of sexual violation in the village is clearly shown to be part of women's lot in the city too. Saroja is warned that in the cities 'men took advantage of the slightest lapse, the least fall in grace or modest behavior encouraged their lusts' (p. 197) - a warning that is substantiated by her sister's seduction by Gupta and the painful consequences of that action. By depicting the very real physical threat posed to women by both city-men like Gupta and village louts like Lachu, the novel goes beyond facile moral distinctions between the evils of the city and the virtues of the country: all men, as Saroja discovers, pose a potential threat to all women. As if to drive home the point, Markandaya closes the novel with Saroja's discovery that even Chingleput - a sweet-seller 'who was about Appa's [father's] age' (p. 43) and a former confidant - is guilty of making unwelcome sexual advances. Saroja's final rejection of Devraj, a suitor she had formerly idealised, reflects the collapse of her romantic idealism.

This collapse, based on a recognition of male violence, is fundamental to the novel's polemic. It works

against the prescriptive tendency of the 'ideal' romance to 'deal convincingly with female fears and reservations by permitting them to surface briefly during a reading process that then explicitly lays them to rest by explaining them away'.[65] It also goes beyond the bounds of the spiritual quest romance described by Frye. Indeed Markandaya's uses women's sexuality to undercut these genres by working through them and transcending both. In this way she reveals how the depiction of women's experience might form a category in fiction that has yet to be given a name.

Markandaya's depiction of Saroja's awakening to sexual desire sets the polarised discourses of sex as functional act and sex as mystery into a personal dimension. Far from being 'a fiction of ideas dressed as characters'[66] the novel describes the emotional fluctuations and inner turmoil of a fully-realised character - Saroja - in all her states. Her physical excitement in Devraj's presence ('She felt herself judder ... She was afraid of her feelings, of what he was doing to her. But he had done nothing, beyond pronouncing her name and one sentence' (p. 204)) and her sexually explicit dreams (p. 227) all work to affirm that, though publicly unacknowledged, female sexual desire is natural and that 'it wasn't necessary to be cast in Lalitha's mold or any mold, the urge was

implanted deep and indestructibly in every human being ' (p. 218). And by describing Saroja's idealism in romantic and religious terms - Saroja's hope that the mystery of sex 'would be revealed' (p. 99) and the belief that 'Virginity is 'an indispensable dew and anointment for maidens' (p. 198) - Markandaya comes to show that while romantic idealism forms an important part of Saroja's awareness, it is also far removed from the reality women experience at the hands of men.

What emerges is indeed a powerful feminist protest which reveals the way in which patriarchal culture sets limits on women's natural desires by prescribing that female sexuality must serve the needs of men, by putting a price on that sexuality (Gupta and the film industry's exploitation of Lalitha, Manikkam's wife as wet-nurse, the value of virginity to a 'good' marriage), and by overriding the needs of the woman herself. The final message in the novel is a bleak one as Saroja rejects the advances of all men - her childhood over.

It is clear that this overt depiction of female desire and women's sexuality, with its underlying message of feminist protest, has helped to produce the conflicting critical appraisals of this work. Charles Larson, who has been cited in this study earlier, has argued:

> Much of the concern with feminine sexuality in Two Virgins is a plea by Markandaya for women's rights. This is not the blatant forthrightness of Women's Lib in the United States but a subtle commentary on women in modern India running through the entire novel. It embraces all the adult females in the narrative.[67]

Others, such as Dr Sarma, have misinterpreted Markandaya's feminist protest altogether. The very fact that Markandaya deals with certain forms of sexual behaviour from a woman's perspective is taken as evidence that she approves of them - a reading that conveniently ignores the author's engagement with the often deleterious consequences of such behaviour. Sarma proceeds to work into his commentary mild ridicule at these 'feminist' aims:

> The domestic debates...appear to indicate a positive stance of the writer with regard to pre-marital sex, abortion and unmarried motherhood. The debate is quite topical and the ideas progressive, and would probably please a section of the reading public in this year of Grace when the world is celebrating International Women's Year.[68]

It seems that Markandaya's feminism, which took a rather muted form in her earlier novels, can now no longer be ignored by Indian critics. In my next chapter I will show how, in one of her most recent novels, Markandaya tethers her feminist perspective to a conception of national identity which draws not upon rural life, but upon history.

Notes and References

1. See Raymond Williams, The Country and the City, p. 286.
2. K.S.N. Rao, 'The Novels of Kamala Markandaya', p. 213.
3. Elizabeth Cowie et al, 'Representation vs. Communication'; p. 127.
4. J.A. Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms (first published 1977; reprinted Middlesex 1982) p. 226. Cuddon has gone on to describe later epics as 'diffused, episodic and very nearly sprawling' with no central hero (p. 227). This movement from the primary to the later epic is paralleled by the development of Markandaya's form as Nectar, her first published work, conforms to most of the principles of the primary epic, whereas The Golden Honeycomb, one of her most recent works is a sprawling saga that shares some of the qualities of the later epics.
5. See Charles Larson, The Novel in the Third World, pp. 131-51.
6. Meenakshi Mukherjee, The Twice-Born Fiction, p. 138.
7. J.M. Bernstein, The Philosophy of the Novel, pp. 50-51.
8. This emphasis on caste, as Charles Larson has pointed out, is entirely missing in the Markandaya text, where it is economic difference rather than the difference of birth which is shown to cause the imbalance of power. See Charles Larson, op. cit., p. 143.
9. Bernstein, p. 51.

10. This use of dated English is also evident in Sahgal's first novel, A Time To Be Happy, but used to very different effect, marking social difference and historical disjunction.

11. Bernstein, p. 53.

12. Paul Merchant, The Epic, p. 11.

13. This is a form which Eugene Lunn, in an analysis of Lukacs' work, has described as belonging to a 'humanist tradition', and as 'a partially successful attempt, under bourgeois conditions, to represent personal interiority and outer social reality as reconcilable through the intervention of active men.' See Marxism and Modernism, p. 95. It is therefore a form which appears to particularly to suited to Markandaya's endeavour of describing the individual in an interdependent relationship with her environment.

14. The tannery is a particularly pertinent symbol in Indo-Anglian literature as cows are sacred to the Hindus. It is also used by Narayan in The Man-eater of Malgudi as the symbol of greed and brutality.

15. S.C. Harrex, 'A Sense of Identity', p. 74.

16. See Bary Argyle, 'Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve', pp. 73-84; and Shantha Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indo-Anglian Fiction, p. 167.

17. Moelwyn Merchant, The Comedy, pp.4; 10-11.

18. As in R.K. Narayan's The Guide (Mysore, 1963), it is

not only the authenticity of the swami but the impossibility of categorising the power of a man who fulfils this important social function that is called into question here.

19. V. Propp, Morphology of the Folktale, pp. 79-80.

20. S. C. Harrex, pp. 69; 67; 68.

21. This is evident where-ever the perspective given is that of the omniscient narrator and attention is drawn to the broader social organism. Some examples of this include: 'It might have surprised the Dandekar s to learn that a fairly extensive organization existed to stabilize this precious commodity ' (p. 9); 'If she had not been in public service constantly working against time, drained of vitality by the ceaseless, swollen flow of sufferers - if she had been in private practice where people came singly in cars and even the standard euphemisms wore plush - she might have added that it was a convenient classification, no more; that a great many women underwent abdominal operations and survived ...' (pp. 117-118); 'his why might be a universal cry, that a great many people as blameless as he were being gouged from grooves they had made for themselves and exposed dangling like blindworms into airs and blights whose existence they had not suspected.' (p. 153).

22. Patricia Waugh, Feminine Fictions, p. 28.

23. Harrex, p. 68.

24. Others texts include Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence and Roots and Shadows, and Nayantara Sahgal's The Day in Shadow. The word 'shadow' has particular significance for Indian women in that the ancient law of Manu stipulates that a woman is half of or a 'shadow' of her husband.

25. Deborah Cameron, Feminism and Linguistic Theory, p. 108.

26.Markandaya describes the serious repercussions that this outlook can have in The Coffer Dams where Howard Clinton, a routine-minded, work-orientated and unimaginative builder, acquires inhuman characteristics.

27. This is repeated even in her later novels, for example in The Golden Honeycomb, where Manjula's body is described as 'sacrosanct' and 'anointing' to her husband (p. 12).

28. Meena Shirwadkar, Image of Woman in Indo-Anglian Fiction, p. 147.

29. I explore this ideal in my General Introduction.

30. Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today' in Mythologies, p. 140.

31. H. Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture" in Negations: Essays in Critical Theory, p. 95.

32. Clifford Leech, Tragedy, p. 38.

33. Hayden White, Metahistory, p. 10.

34. Joanna Kirkpatrick, 'Women in Indian-English Literature', p. 122.

35. B. Jeyifo, 'Tragedy, History and Ideology' in Marxism

and African Literature, edited by G.M. Gugelberger, p. 96.

36. Wilson Harris, Tradition and the West Indian Novel: Critical Essays, p. 89.

37. Quoted in Leech, p. 9.

38. K.S.N. Rao, 'The Novels of Kamala Markandaya', p. 213. This is an interesting example of the extent to which her works are treated as 'romantic fiction'.

39. This point is analysed at greater length in my 'Introduction to Nayantara Sahgal'.

40. For example she uses a sexual metaphor to describe the experience of a dying peasant woman. Possession (p. 173).

41. Susan Brownmiller, Against Our Will, p. 17.

42. Gerda Lerner, The Creation of Patriarchy, p. 8.

43. White, p. 9.

44. Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, Vol.1, p. 103.

45. On 'girlhood': Dorothy Blair Shimer, 'Sociological Imagery in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya', p. 366; on 'pot-boiler': James Dale: 'Sexual Politics in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya', p. 348; on 'pornographic' and Madras University: Shyamala A. Narayan, 'India', JCL, (1985), p. 87.

46. Gillian Beer, The Romance, p. 1.

47. Northrop Frye, The Secular Scripture, p. 54 ff.

48 Janice Radway, Reading the Romance, pp. 124; 127; 131;

126.

49. Ibid., p. 138.

50. Ibid., pp. 138; 127; 126; 146.

51. It is significant that this corresponds to Radway's description of the 'ideology of romance' which 'recommend[s] the usual sexual division of labor that dictates that women take charge of the domestic and purely personal spheres of human endeavour'. See above p. 123.

52. Ibid., p. 131.

53. Another reason why the novel is seen in reductive terms appears to be because the depiction of Lalitha lacks psychological depth. As one critic has observed she is presented 'as someone not quite real: an oversized kewpie doll - all surface with no inner life'. Charles Larson, The Novel in the Third World, p. 147.

54. Radway, p. 131.

55. In two of her novels Some Inner Fury and The Golden Honeycomb Markandaya offers critiques of the romantic perspective. In Some Inner Fury the two worlds, the ideal and the real, are polarised; and by sandwiching the romantic with the real, the novel asserts powerfully that romance is nothing more than a dream, as the ideal relationship between the Indian woman Mira and her English boyfriend Richard is shown to crumble under the demands of a politically divided world.

56. Frye, pp. 15 and 54.

57. In Frye's terms Two Virgins is an impure form of the quest romance, namely 'kidnapped romance, that is, romance formulas used to reflect ascendant religious or social ideals'. pp. 29-30.

58. Radway, p. 126.

59. Dale, p. 348.

60. Larson, pp. 151 and 149.

61. Foucault has argued with regard to sexual control in Europe, 'the most rigorous techniques were formed and, more particularly, applied first with greatest intensity, in the economically privileged and politically dominant classes'; The History of Sexuality, p. 120.

62. Ibid., pp. 97 and 120.

63. Foucault, p. 121.

65. Radway, p.158.

66. Joanna Kirkpatrick, 'Women in Indian-English Literature: The Question of Individuation', p. 126.

67. Larson, p. 151.

68. Dr S. Krishna Sarma,'Two Novels of Kamala Markandaya', p. 33.

4

FEMINISM AND NATIONALISM IN The Golden Honeycomb

The Golden Honeycomb marks the culmination of Markandaya's quest for cultural synthesis. The historical setting - turn-of-the-century India - provides the central theme of the novel: the rise of nationalism and the awakening of the ideals of independence within the country. Stories about a variety of characters from all walks of life combine to suggest the diversity of Indian society. These stories form a complex interweaving of narrative strands that effectively reconstruct the historical period and social organisation of the British Raj. The movement towards national unity, with its partial erosion of caste and class barriers, is embodied in the union between the central character, Rabi, the illegitimate son of a native prince, and Usha, the daughter of an influential Brahmin, each bound to the other by love and a commitment to the national movement.

Yet in many ways this unity remains embryonic: Rabi and Usha are only shown at the early stages of their relationship when Independence is little more than an anticipated event. Cultural unity, suggests Markandaya, is

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a dream that has yet to be realised. Indeed, she is concerned less with representing the potential unity of the Indian people than with demonstrating the similarities between one ruling class and another. In The Golden Honeycomb the British and the Indian élites do not inhabit separate worlds but two mutually supportive parts of the same world. The native prince, Bawiraj III, is clearly seen to derive his power exclusively from the Empire. As will become evident in this chapter, the prince participates in what theorists of colonialism have called 'a process...of conscious affiliation proceeding under the guise of filiation (Said 1984), that is, a mimicry of the centre proceeding from a desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed.'[1] Markandaya goes to considerable lengths in her novel to show the similarities between members of the Indian élite and the British colonialists - each motivated by a sense of duty, a desire for power and a love of family. This analysis of the deployment of power is paralleled by a critical observation of the position of women in Indian society. In the novel Markandaya explores women's possibilities for protest and the exercise of control within the established order.

Markandaya explores the mechanisms of power in India's past in order to isolate and interrogate the basic

inequalities - notably those of caste and gender - that persist in modern India. In particular, she explores the various and diverse positions of Indian women by demythologising 'public' history and reconstructing the past from the dual perspectives of Indian nationalism and what I define as Markandaya's feminism.[2]

The Golden Honeycomb: Against the Exotic

In The Golden Honeycomb we see Markandaya once more using a literary convention - here the historical saga - for politically subversive purposes. Roland Barthes has described how the convention of 'exoticism' is used to transform 'the Other [into] a pure object [or] spectacle'.[3] Barthes argues that this is part of a larger process that works to deny the barbarities of oppression in colonial rule, and to support the myth of a benign power. In this novel Markandaya works within a clearly recognisable 'exotic' form to deconstruct this myth.

The novel uses certain formal devices, which I analyse in my first section, to three specific ends: 1) to demystify the period of Indian colonial history and to reconstruct 2) a specifically Indian perspective and 3) a women's view of the world. This demystification and revisionism works, as I show in my second section, to

uphold a new model of the Indian past that has specific relevance to women. Markandaya's feminism is subtly ironic. It argues that women have found a means of getting their own way which is as powerful - if not more so - than the more obvious tactics employed by men. Furthermore, Markandaya avoids any simple truisms concerning an endemic 'woman power' by presenting the way in which women have achieved power within - and despite - a patriarchal system. I show, in my conclusion, how she achieves this balance. By focussing on women's success and survival, Markandaya both draws attention to their problems and shows realistic ways of overcoming them. The Golden Honeycomb thus is the culmination of Markandaya's endeavour in that it is both a novel of celebration and of protest.

Synopsis: The Struggle for Power

The Golden Honeycomb is a long, rich and complex tale about two forms of power - colonial power and patriarchal power. It recounts the lives of three generations of fictional Indian princes ruling the state of Devapur during the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. This is the period of British rule which saw the emergence and escalation of the nationalist movement, and the early part of Markandaya's novel is underscored by a

wry commentary on the mistaken views of the British and their acolytes who believe the established order to be eternal and immutable.

This discursive thrust of the novel is dramatised through the interlocking stories and perspectives of a plethora of characters both Indian and English, rich and poor. The focus of attention is the ruler's palace where the emergence of nationalism is not keenly felt for some time. The key characters are Bawiraj 111 (the ruler of Devapur), Mohini (his consort and ward of the Dowager), Rabi (their son and Bawiraj's heir), and Manjula (the Dowager, Bawiraj's mother). Other figures such as the Agent/Resident, Arthur Copeland, and the Dewan/Minister, Sir Tirumal Rao, act as the counterpoints in the uneasy balance of power in British India.

Whilst it would be impossible to summarise the narrative, which is itself composed of a multiplicity of stories, in just a few paragraphs - one critic has taken up seven pages of his eight page article doing just this[4] - it is clear that the narrative falls into two main sections. The first describes the tussle between Bawiraj 111's desire to bring up his son as a loyal subject of the British empire and Mohini's determination to educate their son to fight for freedom, and the second deals with

the process of Rabi's self-discovery and his growing commitment to the nationalist movement.

What links the personal narratives of the members of Bawiraj's household with those of other characters is the struggle for power and its effect on the course of Indian history. All the relationships between the characters - especially those between Bawiraj 111 and his English and Indian advisers, between Bawiraj and the two women whom he loves (his mother and his consort), between Bawiraj, the father, and his rebellious son, and between Rabi and his associates - are determined by a struggle for control. Hence the political backdrop to the novel is fully fleshed into contests of the most personal kind. One critic has carried this aspect of the novel to an extreme, arguing that politics is inextricably tied up with sexuality in the text.[5] I would argue that Markandaya's purpose is broader and more complex. She applies the same means of analysis, namely demythologisation and reconstruction, to two different forms of oppression, colonial rule and patriarchal control, but comes to different conclusions about each - conclusions which reflect the fact that while colonialism was defeated, patriarchy remains entrenched in India.

SECTION ONE: Formal Devices: Demystification and Reconstruction

Markandaya uses certain formal devices to demystify the period of colonial rule, and reconstruct the past, from two distinct historical perspectives - that of Indian nationalism, and that of Indian feminism. The extent to which these devices constitute a template for protest and reconstruction can best be studied by comparing them with some of the definitions of the strategies and constituents of mythology as described by Roland Barthes in his seminal essay, 'Myth Today'.[6]

Upon such comparison it is immediately evident that in The Golden Honeycomb Markandaya is working against the prototypes described by Barthes. For example, where Barthes has shown that 'myth deprives the subject of which it speaks of all history' (p. 165), Markandaya is at pains to historicise and contextualise the thoughts and actions of all her characters. In the following pages I analyse Markandaya's demythologisation of the colonial and patriarchal past, and her critical reconstruction of Indian history, using six of Barthes' definitions as a guide.

The Deconstruction of the Language of the Oppressor

In 'Myth Today' Barthes has argued that myth incorporates the 'language of the oppressor', which is 'plenary, intransitive, gestural and theatrical' (p. 162). In her novel Markandaya plays upon many of the affirmations of power evident in both language and action. She does this in two fundamental ways.

First she reveals the 'plenary, intransitive' nature of the language of power by counterpointing its certitudes and formalities with the informal language of the private physical world. Through the variation of pace, linguistic construction and rhetorical strategies she is able to achieve a transference between the distinct realms of state affairs and personal matters.[7]

The text is permeated with the language of state. This formal diction is composed of references to state events and duties and conveyed in complete sentences and measured, often ponderous, tones with the use of a rhetoric that sometimes appears to have been lifted from a nineteenth-century English novel. This works to convey the weight of the formalities which burden the individual characters.[8] This formal diction would in itself appear almost invisible were it not for the periodic eruption of

passages with an uneven pace and breathless tone throughout the text.[9] The contrast between the two forms is most powerfully drawn in the passage that moves from the 'panoramic' account of Rabi's tour of Delhi with its encyclopaedic comprehensiveness and restraint:

> In Delhi Rabi was shown a great deal that was wonderful. He also saw a good deal for himself. He saw mosques and palaces, and sensed in memorials and monuments that transience which had so affrighted Lady Copeland. ... (p. 178)

to a 'close-up' of Rabi's excitement conveyed, through the use of direct language, loose, incomplete sentences and extended dialogue:

> '"I don't know when I've enjoyed myself more!"
>
> Bawiraj skipping, who would believe it, can't believe it himself but there it is. Small hand in large one masterminding the rhythm father and son are tripping it hip-hippety-hop lazily over the turf to the edge of some lake where Mohini sits. ... (p.179)

Furthermore, language here acts as a political medium in the fullest sense: through her assumption of formal language in those passages describing matters of both Empire and Indian state, Markandaya is able to draw useful parallels between two distinct but complementary forms of power - that of colonial and princely rule.

Secondly, Markandaya reveals those aspects of language that are 'gestural and theatrical' by exposing the superficiality of the codes of address (p. 7), conduct and behaviour that oil the wheels of Empire. These codes, or standards, are explicitly referred to in the novel: 'To sustain the Imperial Presence in India certain standards are obligatory, which by their very nature are far removed from the people' (p. 65).

What's more, these codes are shown to distort and depersonalise ordinary human ties. In choosing a suitable spouse for the Maharajah, for example, the dominant criteria including the 'qualities of stability and fruitfulness' have to be met (pp. 21-22). And when Manjula balks at the power of wet nurses to override a 'mother's prerogative', she is surprised to discover that 'this elementary right belongs to the Palace' (pp. 14-15). Already it can be seen that Markandaya has brought attention to the way in which both the British Raj and the Indian Palace work jointly to inhibit the freedom of women.

Apart from suppressing and supplanting natural instincts, these inflexible and absolute codes serve also to constrain the free and uninterrupted communication between individuals who might otherwise be friends.

Bawiraj for example longs to be invited for a family dinner with the Resident, Arthur Copeland, who, in turn would be delighted to invite him. But the strictures imposed by their respective positions make such gestures of friendship awkward to extend. When Bawiraj does eventually receive an invitation, Markandaya is careful to point out the social mores which preclude free association between individuals:

> His ambition - secretly nursed, since he cannot admit qualifying clauses to the belief that he is one of them - has been to receive just such an invitation. Indeed all manner of energies in the country are acutely centred on the issuing and receipt of invitations, from Collector, Commissioner, Governor, upward to His Excellency the Viceroy himself, whose invitation is the most coveted in the absence of the Sovereign. These august personages are themselves plagued by considerations of whom to invite - the most unsuitable characters have been known to inscribe their names in the Visitors' Book. At every level it arouses the utmost anxiety and agitation. (pp.91-2)

Markandaya reveals how, for certain characters, particular formalities and 'gestures' come to be mistaken for the substance of power itself. This delusion is not peculiar to the British, who are 'masters of inversion' (p. 171), but is shared by the Indian princes too. Much humour is drawn in the early part of the novel from the observation that Bawiraj is consistently deluded by the trappings of power, such as rich costumes and state durbars, which don't fool his perspicacious paramour, and how

he is even enslaved by them to the extent that he later goes to great lengths to affect an air of calm and civility with his rebel son who is undermining his power (see pp. 435-36). Hence Markandaya not only debunks the mythologising process through the use of linguistic contrast and argument, but also uses dramatic enactment to expose the elaborate charade of which it is made.

The Historicising of Subjects and Events

Another aspect of myth described by Barthes is that 'myth deprives the subject of which it speaks of all history' (p. 165). Markandaya, who has conducted extensive research into the period she describes, subverts this by repeatedly drawing attention to the fact that the events of the novel are part of a broad historical process. She does this by describing the interrelationship between seemingly unrelated individuals and events (for example, between the Viceroy's wealth and Janaki's poverty: 'Janaki, the servant girl, has no private pocket to dip into ... ' (p. 65)). In drawing attention to the connections between the cells of this vast 'golden honeycomb', Markandaya reaches towards a broader view of history that ascribes a natural unity to the events.

It is significant that as the scale of Markandaya's historical vision expands, her focus on Rabi, the rebel prince who joins the nationalists, sharpens. Rabi, who grows up with the movement, comes to embody the nationalist spirit of the novel as both visionary and participant:

> Rabi stood in this lonely eminence, gazing, and soon entranced, and presently felt that exchange between man and landscape that persuades one of unity, a process which, if carried far enough - and lifetimes can be insufficient -will end in resolutions of the nagging enigma. (p. 373)

The novel offers more than historical background however. It contains a discursive subtext, a commentary, that is repeatedly brought into play, particularly during those moments when the (fictitious) characters 'collide' with particular historical events. One notable example is the passage describing the millworkers' strike and the hold-up of Bawiraj's car (pp. 250-57).

The passage is rich with rationalisations that draw attention to the historical process[10] - 'the mill workers of Bombay - though it would have been no consolation to them had they known it - were part of this larger pattern; that is to say they were victims of market forces' (p. 251), 'castles, like kings depend upon ... immutability' (p. 252), ' the selection [of venue] is less deliberate

than by a process of osmosis' (p. 253) - that collectively work to present an anti-colonial, alternative, Indian view of history:

> Labour was cheap.
> It was cheap because scores of thousands of people had been disinherited of their land, most of them of their spirit. They neglected to claim, or reclaim, a share in the equity that was their birthright. The rates these people were paid were determined by the free play of market forces. Few, even among those who had most cause to question them, understood the nature of this determined hoax. (p. 251)

Further she brings into play the important role played by women in the historical process, not only by using Jaya as the woman who initiates Rabi into both nationalism and sex (pp. 281-84), but also in her description of the broad historical event of the strike where 'women outnumber the men. Mumbai-ah! Mumbai-ah! they chant, these girl and women, a cry that is variously interpreted as an invocation of the temple goddess' (p. 253).

In Markandaya's novel history is in constant dialogue with the present. The struggles of women in particular are placed in this broad historical context, allowing women - and the reader - to draw parallels with the struggle for Indian independence and to understand, and therefore perhaps to harness, the dynamics of social change.

Political Clash and Multiple Perspectives

Barthes has argued that myth is 'depoliticised speech': it operates by purifying things, making them innocent, giving them a natural and eternal justification. Barthes describes this operational movement in the following way: 'In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves' (p. 156).

Not only is Markandaya's novel rich in dialectics, it actively works to fracture homogeneity through its incorporation of a multiplicity of form and dialect into the narrative. There are several contending voices in the text and these produce a plethora of different perspectives (see my next section below) that work to promote its discursive thrust.

On a broad level it can be seen that Markandaya sets up two competing perspectives - the British and the Indian - against one another. In drawing attention to the competition between these perspectives, which are described variously as 'the Indian view' (a term used

principally by by Mohini) (pp. 155 and 157), 'the British view' (p. 157) and 'the thoughts of British India' (p. 380), Markandaya is able to focus on the contingency of truth.

The clash between the British and the Indian view is most in evidence in the passage describing the Delhi Durbar of 1903, when Markandaya reveals the competing constructions of history, ending significantly with an alternative view that supersedes the other two: a woman's perspective:

> The views of the Durbar by those who attended it - as subsequently recorded, and even at the time - showed a refreshing diversity.
>
> The British view, which they saw no reason to change, was that it achieved its declared purpose. This purpose being manifold, the issue singled out for pride of place was the demonstration of unity: the drawing together of the disparate elements in the country under one flag, and the public acknowledgement by the Ruling Chiefs of their allegiance to the King-Emperor. ...
>
> The Indian view was necessarily divided between the élite and the proletariat. Spokesmen for the proletariat were, later on, apt to call it a vulgar extravaganza that affronted the impoverished nation. The proletariat, however, at least that portion of it perched on the earth mound outside the amphitheatre thrown up especially for them - these lucky citizens from their grandstand view found it a thoroughly enjoyable spectacle. The élite, but for one or two carping dissenters, pronounced it an outstanding success.
>
> Mohini's view was jaundiced. Bile sprang, not only from inner convictions that resisted imperious enactments, but also from certain constraints that she discerned in her position: specifically, physical restrictions, since her view of proceedings was

> through the latticed framework of the enclosed Gallery for Native Ladies. The nature of her seating - peephole, and humiliating,in her opinion - confirmed suspicions she had harboured and roused in her a fury that she was only prevented from venting by the distance that separated the Gallery from the front row where Bawiraj basked. (p. 157)

Here the coloniser's perspective is characterised by the simplicity which Barthes defines as an essential part of the mythologising process. Markandaya proceeds to puncture this simple British view by describing, first, the disparate views of various Indian social groups, and second, the very personal view of Mohini, who calls into question the British view that the Durbar describes a 'demonstration of unity', and challenges its very justification by her 'inner convictions that resisted imperious enactments'. The passage not only shows the diversity of opinions within the Indian population, but also brings the ironic perspective of a woman outsider to bear on the absurdity of the occas ion and its symbolic pretensions.

The Deconstruction of Stereotypes

Barthes has argued that myth simplifies the portrayal of human beings, and involves both the creation of types (p. 169) and the objectification of the Other (p. 166). Markandaya repeatedly reveals the extent to which this

aspect of myth is part of the British perspective by describing its stereotyped perception of the Indian people and limited understanding of their culture. For example, she describes the British lack of understanding of the philosophically-based political movement of satyagraha in terms that strongly convey their utter estrangement from the people: '... it became dreadful to endure. These numb, dumb people, sitting it out , all round the clock. In protest, or condemnation. Owl-eyed, exuding silent reproaches' (p. 463). Markandaya also deconstructs stereotypes through her identification with individual characters from a wide variety of backgrounds - palace servants and employees such as the astute pandit, cantankerous head-gardener, fastidious tailor, proud jeweller and Manjula's purposeful maid are all individualised, and their contrasting perspectives brought into play.

These individual perspectives not only serve to flesh out socially inferior characters who might otherwise be stereotyped: they also contrast directly with the naive perspectives of the British, thereby emphasising the gulf of understanding between British and Indian. Janaki, the palace sweeper and childhood playmate of Rabi, is one of the most poignant characters in the novel. At risk of losing her job she is driven to seek help from Lady

Copeland. The contrast between dishevelled and scared sweeper girl and Administrator's wife is brought home in their different perceptions of the situation:

> [Janaki] is shivering and snorting, and a thin malodorous steam rises from her rags, which are soaked through and beginning to disintegrate indecently in places, but none of these things is apparent to her. She is only overridingly conscious that she has attained, is in, the presence of the power that alone can avert her fate. ...
> 'Memsahib!' she utters.
> Lady Copeland, bemused, looks down from palmy heights. An assortment of rags, it seems to her, blown in by the monsoon wind. But no. The sodden bundle is human. It is a girl, wild-eyed, wild fingers clutching her gown, there are sooty smudges along the hem. With worse to come. Petrified though she is Lady Copeland can feel. She feels the hideous tentacle that this frightening creature has wrapped about her ankles. Dripping. Gibbering. (p. 175)

Markandaya then draws attention to their kinship by calling them 'sisters under the skin' (p. 176), and describing Lady Copeland as Janaki's 'soul-sister' who shares with Janaki a legendary grandmother (p. 177). The characters' perception of this common sisterhood is impeded not only by differences of race but also by differences of wealth, which result in Janaki perceiving Lady Copeland as 'the power that can alone avert her fate', and by Lady Copeland's ignorance, which prevents her at first perceiving that 'the sodden bundle is human'. The fact that Markandaya never lapses into glib counter-stereotyping of the British indicates the consistency with

which she employs the demythologising formula. Instead she chooses to reveal some of the possible reasons for the negative perceptions held by the British as, for example, in the case of Lady Copeland, by drawing attention to the social segregation that breeds her ignorance (see pp. 96; 174; and 308).

Here Markandaya neatly shows how a woman's perspective can be constrained by her other social allegiances, and that it is in recognising their kinship with women from different social groups that women as a group may be able to to dismantle the oppressive system that inhibits them all. Markandaya shows that stereotypes not only work to alienate one race from another but also to alienate women from themselves. It is not merely the colonial myth that is being questioned here but the patriarchal myth too, and the criticism of one, in Markandaya's rationale, necessarily implies a criticism of the other.

'Both-Andism' and The Discursive Deconstruction of Power

Barthes has shown how myth contains a 'Neither-Norism' 'which consist[s] in stating two opposites and balancing the one with the other so as to reject them both' (p. 166). In contrast, Markandaya promotes a 'Both-Andism' that works to reveal the similarities between the

apparently brute power of the British and the benign power of the Indian princes.

This strategy negates any possibility of a naive manichean perspective of the Indian colonial past, as members of both the Indian élite and the British administration are shown to share responsibility for upholding the Empire. Instead of making sweeping comparisons between the Raj and the Palace however - a strategy which would lead to the sort of oversimplification found in myth - Markandaya pinpoints specific similarities of situation and outlook between individual characters such as Bawiraj 111 and Sir Arthur Copeland, who are both bound by their sense of duty to make 'sacrifices' in the name of their office: Bawiraj and his wife 'understand...that sacrifice is expected of them in the name of the Ruling House' (p. 15), Sir Arthur feels that 'sacrifice is part of his contract of service to India' (p. 90), which even extends to the fact that their respective households mirror one another: pearl buttons, we are told, 'are the bane of...[Lady Copeland's] ayah's , as of Bawiraj's dresser's life, of which neither owner is aware, but if aware would be heedless. There are unsuspected areas of affiliation even between these two' (p. 97). Similarly Markandaya draws comparisons between Tirumal Rao, the Dewan whose duty is to liaise between the

Maharajah and the Administrator, and Copeland, both of whom feel they carry a 'sacred trust' (pp. 68 and 215) in their positions of power. Such specificity conveys the complex network that sustains the Empire, and quietly ridicules the supreme sacrifice made by men of apparently different backgrounds in order to sustain it.

Markandaya's strategy of 'Both-Andism' does not merely expose the part that Indians played in their own subjugation: it also reveals the complex power structure within the Indian community. She is particularly careful to expose the importance of caste in this, and is very critical of the privileges withheld by the Brahmins. She goes to considerable lengths to show that this indigenous hierarchy is as divisive, and perhaps even more powerful, as the one imposed and sustained by the Raj:

> The Brahmins have established a network, as invisible, as widespread, and as coolly powerful as anything the British have contrived, which secures immunity for those upon whom it falls. The British do it blandly. There is hardly a Governor, or Commissioner, or Resident , or Commanding Officer in the sub-continent with whom Sir Arthur, through school and club and country house association, is not acquainted. ... The Brahmin web is fine-spun, of blood and marriage ties, of inter-connecting ministers and lawyers and teachers and priests, and elaborate, authoritative codes of a subtle society. Those who shelter under either umbrella rarely feel the heat of the sun. (pp.78-79)

In a later passage Markandaya succeeds not only in interrogating the justification of both colonial and caste power, but seems to imply that it is the caste system which promotes the discrimination inherent in colonial rule. It is significant that she brings such interrogation of the caste system into play when describing an incident which would otherwise appear to have no place for it: namely, the recorded killing of Atu, a cook, and an unnamed coolie, by troopers of the 9th Lancers. Here the hierarchy of the English class system seems relatively 'clean-cut' compared to the snobbery, overt prejudice and 'caste disdain' inherent in the Indian social order:

> Equality, like morality, was widely considered in British circles to be not absolute, but relative. There were several bands, and most people knew to which they belonged, although it is true there was a certain squabbling and confusion in the middle reaches. There was no question, however, that the ruling class, the British, belonged to the top band and the labouring class, the coolies, to the bottom. They claimed no privileges and were merely thankful to, as it were, continue to exist.
> Only the threat to his existence made Atu depose against his masters as he did.
>
> In Brahmin households like the Minister's only a Brahmin could be a cook. He was entitled to (and exacted) the same honour as his employer.
> No Brahmin would enter a regimental cookhouse. They pinched their nostrils as they went by in a pointed manner that officers and men found insupportable. There was nothing however to be done about this. The Brahmins were effectively protected by their own caste disdain. Officers and men, consequently, had to make-do with the lower orders. These lower orders had no caste, and few human rights, to safeguard them.
>
> Atu was one of these. So was the coolie.

> The men who assaulted the cook and the coolie did not consider them as human beings on any level that counted. (p. 114)

Although the Brahmins are not themselves directly responsible for the deaths of the cook and the coolie, Markandaya makes clear that their outlook sustains the very system which makes such injustice possible and that the British use 'the system to ratify and shore up their own imperial presence' (p. 5).[11] The Golden Honeycomb contradicts those critics who claim that Markandaya is more able in criticising foreign power rather than indigenous injustice.[12] Here she shows that a basic brutality lies at the centre of all undemocratic social orders.

Yet, as the passage describing Mohini's frustration at being confined to the Gallery for Native Ladies shows, both colonial and caste power work to subjugate women: a combination of British decorum, Indian purdah, and the relegation of Mohini to the category of 'Native Lady' literally serves to restrict her movement. The extent to which social categorisation is used in both British and Indian circles to limit an individual's freedom, and in particular a woman's freedom, is most fully explored in the case of Mohini.

Mohini is a migrant whose position as Bawiraj's mistress means that she holds no official position - either in Indian or English circles. She is, as she herself acknowledges 'invisible' (p. 109) as 'officially she does not exist' (p. 78), and remains unnamed, because unnameable, in both British and Indian circles (pp. 109 and 118). She recognises that in resisting any attempt to 'regularise' her position she leaves the English 'without a single thumbscrew' (p. 417), and is able to preserve some of the independence she so cherishes. She falls, for example, well outside Copeland's sphere of influence: 'The tight net that restrains the regulars has these holes through which the irregulars slip. Mohini has given tart, vociferous, and repeated indications that she has no intention of regularising the position' (p. 111). Whilst fully conscious of the disadvantages of being a 'kept woman' (p. 206) she uses her hold over Bawiraj, a power based upon his love for her, to tactical advantage in deciding the upbringing and education of her son, Rabi, the future heir to the throne. (Indeed she is the only central character in the novel who is shown to have the luxury of deciding her own future, of making her own choices.) Through focussing on a character who lies outside the pale of both British and Indian society Markandaya is able to express her rejection of injustices endemic within both groups. Further, in questioning,

through Mohini, patriarchal definitions and categorisation Markandaya succeeds in affirming a feminist aim described by Rosalind Miles as that of 'pushing forward, not merely for new definitions, but for the right to define'.[13]

The Ironic Voice

Barthes has argued that myth promotes 'the statement of fact' which in reality tends towards the subjective, unrationalised and putatively unquestionable quality of proverbs (p. 168). Markandaya contends the absolutism of myth by revealing the contingency of truth through the use of multiple perspectives and by revealing the ironies, and paradoxes, of the British presence in India. Sometimes this criticism takes the form of wry observations that challenge the received view of the glory of Empire such as describing the burdens of state: 'Both sides endure, not without grace. India is a capital country for instilling the virtue of endurance' (p. 8).

The clearest description of the paradoxical results of colonial rule comes in the portrayal of Bawiraj 111. He fits Macaulay's description of the ideal Indian subject - someone 'Indian in blood but English in taste and opinion'[14] - and is shown to be something of an anomaly:

'a British creation' (p. 106) who, at eighteen, after training at the military academy, emerges as a 'passable imitation of a young English nobleman. The trouble is that he is the Indian Ruler of an Indian State' (p. 34). His dependence on and allegiance to the British Empire is such 'that it becomes a matter of pride to consider himself her [Queen Victoria's] subject' (p. 18), and the conflict between his outlook and position is fully evident in the fact that he 'would not dream of entrusting his future to the unruly, affectionate crowds that besiege his carriage and the gates of his Palace and beg for sight of their Maharajah' (p. 64).

Markandaya is scathingly satirical in revealing the lengths to which the colonial authorities go to preserve their facade of benevolence and progress. They clear away 'eyesores along the Processional route. ... All hovels within sight of Durbar participants have been torn down and the bemused inhabitants hustled off into the hinterland. ... In the Hospital ... a complete ward has been cleared of its mouldering inmates. A detachment of healthy volunteers waits, ready to slip between spotless sheets at word of inspection' (pp. 134-35). Even here Markandaya takes care to remind her readers of the correspondence between the British Raj and former imperialists: the elephants in the glittering procession

have been 'fed and watered (peppercorn rates) at villages en route, by villagers resigned - it has gone on for centuries - to the passage of armies and rulers as they are to the visitations of locusts' (pp. 133-34).

The most explicitly critical voice in the text belongs to Mohini who consistently questions her lover's views and interrogates his ideals. Hers is a two-pronged attack against British control and patriarchal power respectively. As a critic of the Empire her role is instructive. Aware of the constraints of her husband's position, she constantly serves to remind him of the realities that lie behind the trappings of rule. This emerges, for example, in one of her many spirited disputes with him over the education of their son:

> 'Discipline! Are you trying to make him a sepoy or something?'
> 'I have the boy's best interests at heart.'
> 'So have I! I don't want him trussed up like you.'
> 'Am I trussed up?'
> 'Do you imagine you're free'
> 'Of course I'm free,' says Bawiraj wearily.
> Mohini jingles the bangles on her wrist. She thinks him thick, but continues to love him. (pp. 55-56)

Markandaya chooses the medium of dialogue once again to bring home the immediacy of another exchange between Mohini and Bawiraj, this time over his desire to install her in the Summer Palace, which as Mohini is quick to

recognise would work to regularise her position, and curb her freedom. Further she points out that the policy of female segregation is similar to the treatment that conquering armies used on their enemies, that such treatment has ancient roots and that freedom between the sexes can only exist if there is freedom of movement:

> ' I would like you to have an establishment of your own. Where you and the boy can live in style, on your own -'
> ' Why don't you wall us up then, like your ancestors did with their enemies, if you want to be done with us? If all you want is to be rid of us?'
> 'Rid of you! Never!'
> 'Yes, what else? Out of your sight and out of your mind!'
> 'You can visit the Palace whenever -'
> 'Yes. And when I do I shall be allowed to peep at you from behind the curtains when you sit on your gaddi? Or would that be counted too great a liberty?' (p. 44)

From these passages it is clear that Markandaya uses irony in order to demythologise imperial control - and to expose the similarities that exist between colonial and patriarchal power.

As will be seen, it is the feminist perspective that ultimately predominates in the novel. Although Markandaya uses a variety of formal means - variations of pace and style, multiple stories and perspectives, historical contextualisation, irony, argument and commentary - for the demythologising ends of relativising truth and

establishing alternative versions, and visions, of events, it is clear that it is the Indian women in the novel - Mohini, Manjula, Janaki (and her double Jaya), Vatsala and Usha - who directly take into their hands the task of exposing the many myths of history. It is they who overtly criticise the misuse of power; it is their voices that rise to challenge the men whose sense of 'public duty' blinds them to the realities of injustice and oppression; it is they who are both the prophets of the future and the subjects of the past.

SECTION TWO: A Critical Perspective: The Women's View

The fundamental difference between Markandaya's treatment of the feminist perspective and the nationalist one is evident in the narrative emplotment of the novel: whereas the nationalist perspective is shown to look forward to a completed historical process, that is Independence,[15] the feminist perspective remains open, unresolved and in dialogue with the present. Why should there be this discrepancy? One reason is obvious - that whilst nationalism found its completion in the instigation of Independence, the feminist quest is far from over. Another reason for this lack of resolution to the feminist

quest lies in the fact that the novel is a feminist text in the fullest sense, fulfilling a variety of demands that are necessarily - because of the comprehensiveness of their aims - in contention.

These demands can be divided into three groups: the demand for positive role models, the demand for the reconstruction of women's part in history, and the demand for a set of critical tools by which women can be seen to challenge the patriarchal order. I will analyse each of these demands and the way in which Markandaya's text meets them, paying particular attention to her characterisation of Indian women.

Positive Role Models: Providing a Strong Identity

One of the principal demands of prescriptive feminism in the literary-critical field is that, in Cheri Register's words, 'a literary work...provide role-models, [and] instil a positive sense of female identity by portraying women who are "self-actualizing, whose identities are not dependent on men."' She adds that 'characters should not be idealised beyond plausibility'.[16] Such over-idealisation, or 'romanticism' as one critic has called it, has inherent limitations in that it contains within it an image of a

'strong, powerful woman ... that allows for no moment of weakness, and cannot reflect the diversity and complexity of our desires.'[17] It is for this reason that one of the implicit aims of prescriptive feminism is to promote a plurality of plausible female role models.

A striking feature of The Golden Honeycomb is that it fulfils this aim admirably. Peopled with a multiplicity of clearly defined, complex, female characters, the novel sets out to show how their various strengths - independence of mind and action, willpower, courage, stoicism - appear to emerge from their contention with the very real restrictions they face. There is Mohini, the wilful courtesan, who uses her sexual allure to get her way (pp. 107 and 400); there is Manjula, the Dowager Queen, who uses a mother's influence to determine her son's actions (p. 44); there is Janaki, the sweeper, who retains a fighting spirit in the face of oppression; there is Jaya, the striking millworker, whose compassion for Rabi is matched by her resilience and courage in a time of crisis (pp. 282-86); there's Usha, the Dewan's daughter, whose interest in martial affairs (pp. 334 and 337) is matched by a strength of will that allows her to control her father repeatedly (pp. 364 and 383-84); and finally there's Vatsala, the Dewan's wife, who, like so many of Markandaya's previous heroines, manages to carve a

place for herself within the ambit of a traditional role, by using a wife's control of household affairs to determine the conduct of her husband and family, and of whom it is noted: 'if she is content to live within the shadow of her husband, it is more form than substance that is conceded. ... This diamond mind perceives the realities of a loaded situation and persuades her to work from within her female role. ... The Dewan's wife is respected as the acme of Hindu womanhood without having actually to endure its rigours' (p. 116).

The plausibility of these role models depends upon the interaction of their strengths with the realities of their situation. Choosing from a limited range of options, the women characters still manage to mould affairs to suit them. In the process of portraying such characters Markandaya is able to lay claim to an alternative vision of history that challenges some of the myths of women's seclusion. For example she shows how, with the exception of Vatsala, whose thoughts centre on household matters, all the women are nationalists and in touch with the political climate of their time. This goes against the myth that women's seclusion from public affairs means that they are out of touch with political events. Indeed, they are kept so closely informed of events that 'the British are convinced of an extensive zenana spy system' (p. 34).

What's more Markandaya shows how women have evolved for themselves a different form of power that derives from extra-societal sources. In complete contrast to the men in the novel, whose powers derive from their public office, the women in the novel are shown to have strengths drawn from their personal qualities. Their power, it seems, is independent of all official sanctions, and therefore to a degree they are more free than men.

Women in History: Reclaiming the Past

The importance of relating women's experience is as important as that of placing this experience in an historical context. As Golo Mann has shown a positive sense of identity is made possible primarily through a sense of one's history:

> If a civilisation were deprived of any conscious contact with its history, it would not remain in one piece for long ... In the process of comparing ourselves historically, we grasp our own origins, the likeness repeating itself, and also what is unique in our experience.[18]

Certain critics have argued that the male monopolisation of historiography has resulted in a lopsided presentation of women's role in the making of history. Jannssen-Jurreit, for example, writes that 'Women are rarely shown

fighting for anything, their rights are 'given' to them'.[19]

The Golden Honeycomb works to redress this prevailing imbalance in historiography by presenting women who are rebellious both on the personal and on the public level. This is more than wishful construction: recent studies reveal that women in the courts of the native Indian rulers did in fact wield significant power and political influence.[20] In Markandaya's novel, Manjula is 'a strong woman' (p. 25) who exercises considerable control within the court till the end of her days to the extent that she is described as 'the power behind the throne' (p. 431). Her story, reported rather than fully dramatised, serves primarily to complement that of Mohini, who is described as 'spirited' (p. 30), 'wayward' and headstrong' (p. 35). One of the key features of the characterisation of Mohini is that she is persistently shown to be questioning Bawiraj[21] : 'what's wrong with continuing as we are now? ... Why don't you wall us up then ...?' (p. 44), 'Haven't we given enough? ... Are we to offer up our sons as well?' (p. 315), 'Why should he bear the name of your line?' (p. 35). Even when her thoughts are described in the third person, her persistent 'why' predominates: considering her unsanctioned pregnancy she wonders 'why when the pleasure has been shared, the burden should be single and

be borne by her alone' (p. 30). At the end of the novel this female line of inquiry continues through Usha, Rabi's nationalist friend, who asks the rhetorical question: 'whoever heard of a revolution for men only?' (p. 432).

Clearly questions, dialogues and disputes - which express much of the action of female rebellion in the novel - lie outside the ambit of recorded history. But by revealing the flaws and weaknesses of historical documentation, such as the clashing 'records' of the British and the Indians of the Delhi Durbar, Markandaya is able to affirm the primacy of the woman's vision of events which draws from a different, more direct, language than the wordy and prosaic language of state.

Such an affirmation of an alternative vision serves both to show the limitations of patriarchal views (and men's inability to penetrate women's minds), and to remind the reader of the promises of Independence that have yet to be kept. Markandaya is able to undermine patriarchal myths by revealing that their reliance on an evaluative system that effectively 'silences' women. For example through Mohini's story Markandaya is able to question the myth that a court concubine is the property of a prince (which has at its foundation the assumption that the concubine has not chosen her position), and to

reveal that this is based on a (patriarchal) system of categorisation that does not allow for alternatives outside marriage. Further Markandaya reclaims the nationalist past for women, affirming their special place in the Independence movement: it is no accident that all the key Indian women characters are nationalists. She also reclaims those aspects of Indian culture that give priority to women, such as the Hindu law of women's inheritance 'Stridhanna' (p. 214).

This alternative vision is one that is based on different values to those of the established hierarchy. Kinship ties are not established merely on the basis of marriage, class, caste or race, but are instead formed by human sympathies and affinities such as the 'independent streak' shared by Manjula and Mohini (p. 314). Though their association cannot be translated into official terms, both are united by political and personal perspectives and their mutual love for Bawiraj and Rabi. The female line, it appears, is not necessarily linear - the power structure is neither hierarchical (Manjula and Mohini share power) nor based on economics (the shared kinship between Lady Copeland and Janaki). Thus the women's perspective of the historical past does more than offer an alternative vision of events, and an alternative set of priorities and principles. Markandaya's novel is a

critical work in the fullest sense: it is a novel that both challenges the patriarchal order and one that reveals some of the means necessary to a feminist analysis of history.

A Framework for Protest: Challenging the Present

In The Golden Honeycomb Markandaya uses a wide variety of positive role models to demonstrate different forms of protest against a common enemy - patriarchal domination. The experience of Mohini for example serves to remind us of the physical and social restrictions experienced by women. The lives of Janaki and Jaya, on the other hand, draw attention to the economic problems faced by poorer women. And, through Manjula, the Dowager Queen, Markandaya comes close to revealing the important part Indian women have to play in retrieving and bearing witness to their own history. Manjula is the story-teller (p. 362) - the bearer of myths and family histories, which are described by Rabi as '"inspiring"' (p. 431), - whose role serves to dramatise the importance of female narrative construction. Between them the Indian women in the novel serve as avenues of interrogation, affirmation and protest, constituting a multi-pronged attack on both colonial and patriarchal power.

The novel not only argues for the importance of women reclaiming their past, however. It also argues for their need to reclaim control over their bodies and their sexuality. Indeed, characters such as Mohini and Jaya are not merely shown to take the initiative in sex but also to sexually dominate their partners (see pp. 147 and 282). Mohini is repeatedly seen to elude her lover's desire for sexual control - 'sometimes she would simply not allow him, in her thoroughly selfish fashion, unless she wanted it too' (p. 186; also see p. 107) - and to withdraw her favours when affronted: 'Mohini was so incensed when she finally discovered the details [about the salt tax] that she refused the Maharajah her bed' (p. 400).

Indeed, Mohini is shown to tread a very narrow path between maintaining control over her own sexuality, and using her sexuality to control others; between retaining her independence and 'play[ing] her lover as she would a fish' (p. 54). This ambivalence has been noted by the critic James Dale, who suggests that the Maharajah's fidelity to Mohini 'arises not just from the mutual pleasure they take in each other, though this persists, but from Mohini's skilful control of her powerful sexuality, which in turn controls the hopelessly devoted Maharajah. The strategy of granting sexual pleasure as a reward for submission to her other demands is successfully

used by Mohini'.[22] Yet for Dale, Mohini's conscious use of her sexuality to control the Maharajah constitutes less a form of manipulation, which as one critic points out 'depends on the status quo of female dependency in order to be effective',[23] than a celebration of sexuality itself - and this, in turn, forms the basis of Dale's somewhat colourful assertion that the novel is a 'work of triumphant maturity [in which] sex becomes the transforming force that through the green fuse drives the flower'.[24]

I suggest, however, that the manipulative aspects of Mohini's sexuality have more to do with material power than with symbolic transformation. Dale's assessment serves to depoliticise sexuality, and in doing so it diverts attention from what I regard as Markandaya's critical portrayal of the social, sexual and cultural bonds circumscribing the lives of Indian women. Mohini is significant precisely because she uses her sexuality - the one power that gives her personal leverage in a masculine world - to challenge these constraints. She is a concubine by choice; in refusing to marry the Maharajah she retains her independence. Her use of sexuality is certainly manipulative, but it is also a way of negotiating a degree of freedom within a rigid hierarchy that seeks to deprive women of both volition and voice.

The consequences of capitulating to the demands of that hierarchy are demonstrated through Markandaya's portrayal of the Maharajah's wife, Shanta Devi. Somewhat similar to Nalini in A Handful of Rice, Shanta Devi embodies the passivity and the sexual compliance demanded of an ideal Indian wife. Yet this is both a failed relationship and a socially enforced one. Markandaya suggests that social and sexual fulfilment for both the sexes will only become possible when women exercise some control over their destinies - which is to say, when there is a new social order.

The dual emphasis on the importance of women taking charge of their physical destinies and on reclaiming their historical past is fundamental to Markandaya's feminist perspective. Through a process of systematic and comprehensive demythologisation she succeeds in interrogating not only the past but the present too. Although in The Golden Honeycomb it is clear that Markandaya reiterates some of the concerns evident in her earlier works, by setting her feminist argument in the period of the Independence struggle, she is able to emphasise that despite women's energy, resilience, and investment in the future, the realities of women's oppression remain true today. For, as Rosalind Miles has shown:

> All democratic experiments, all revolutions, all demands for equality have so far, in every instance, stopped short of sexual equality.[25] [italics removed]

Notes and References

1. Bill Ashcroft et al., The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial literatures, p. 4.

2. Another text by Markandaya that explores cultural synthesis and the role of women is The Coffer Dams (1969), which describes the construction of a dam in virgin territory and the development of a relationship between the the wife of the builder, Helen Clinton, and the native Bashiam. In the novel Markandaya sets up polarities and puts them in contention: the power of the machine against the force of the river; the security of daylight versus the uncertainties of the night; the power struggle between East and West, Indian worker and British

overlord. Only one polarity is shown not to be in contention: the different and discrete worlds of husband and wife, made clear even in the opening sentence of the novel - 'It was a man's town'. Markandaya shows that whilst Helen's affair with Bashiam, a skilled crane driver who stands on the periphery between two worlds, (Bashiam's skills and training set him apart from his people while his tribal origins make him a figure of fun - a 'jungly wallah' - to the other workers) serves to resolve a cultural gulf, the rift between husband and wife remains.

3. Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today' in Mythologies, 117-74 (166).

4. S.P. Appasamy, 'The Golden Honeycomb: A Saga of Princely Life in India by Kamala Markandaya', 56-63.

5. James Dale, 'Sexual Politics in the Novels of Kamala Markandaya', p. 355.

6. Roland Barthes, 164-74.

7. c.f. Sahgal's use of two forms of language in A Time To Be Happy which I analyse in my study of this novel.

8. It should be noted that from about page 200 onwards - at that point in the narrative when the focus shifts from the unimaginative and British-orientated Bawiraj 111 to his son Rabi - there is a distinct breakdown of formal language and an increasing concentration on individual, fractured perspectives, directly related. This substantiates my view that Markandaya's choice of language

is a conscious move in her demythologising process.

9. Some of these passages can be found on pp. 183;, 192; 202-04; 234; 296; 323; 423-25; and 448.

10. The use of the present tense for much of the novel also furthers this end of describing history as a process that gradually unfolds. It is also one of those elements of the Homeric epic described in my study of Rao's Kanthapura. Other elements of this epic form found in the novel are the focus on the community and the emphasis on orality. Both novels are of course describing a national movement, but the fundamental difference between the two is that where Kanthapura described a seamless interaction between character and environment, Markandaya's novel is deliberately fractured.

11. See A.P. Thornton, Imperialism in the Twentieth Century, pp. 110-11. In this comprehensive analysis of 20th Century imperialism, Thornton demonstrates how the imperialist powers cultivated and came to rely on the collaboration of an indigenous élite to maintain imperial control. 'Everywhere...a bureaucracy had to select, or sometimes create, a group of agents with whom it could do business and through whom it could get its imperial business done. ... Empire had long been accustomed to the presence in its midst of princes and pashas who bent to the prevailing wind and who turned an expectant face or cheek to the "country power."'

12. S.C. Harrex, 'A Sense Of Identity',JCL, 65-78 (77).

13. Rosalind Miles, The Women's History of The World, p. 287.

14. Macaulay in 1835, quoted in Kumari Jayawardena, Feminism and Nationalism, p. 76.

15. There are many hints of forthcoming Independence. Two of the most obvious are the ironic tone used in the early part of the novel to question the permanence of the Raj, and the sense of fulfilment that Rabi, a child of nationalism, feels at the end of the novel.

16. Cheri Register,'Americam Feminist Literary Criticism: A Biographical Introduction' in Feminist Literary Theory edited by Mary Eagleton, p. 171.

17. Elizabeth Wilson,'Mirror Writing: An Autobiography' in Feminist Literary Theory (as above), p. 183.

18. Golo Mann quoted in M. Janssen-Jurreit, Sexism: The Male Monopoly on History and Thought, p. 16.

19. Ibid., p. 25. The relationship between historiography and the value of role models has been extensively explored by Janssen-Jurreit in her study in in which she argues that: 'The psychological substructure of history writing has remained the same as in societies with exclusively oral traditions. Myths , the whole treasury of opportunity for identification, are woven by men who are initiated into the tribal secrets. Women are aware of the secrets but are excluded. Thus, the perspective and content of

history are defined by men. Without institutions and ceremonies to pass their history along, women are not able to confront their own myths, their history.

The effect of all this is a constant lack of female role models. The suppression of women's movements in history isolates every woman; there is nothing by which she can orient herself to bring her personal experience into continuity with the past. ...Historiography thus becomes an agent which, on one hand, produces a closed male solidarity and precludes a female one; and yet, on the other hand, also produces a solidarity among women based on male values' (p. 33).

20. M. Duley and M. Edwards, The Cross-Cultural Study of Women, pp. 156-57.

21. This is also true, though to a lesser extent, of the characterisation of the 'contrary' (p. 21) Manjula: see pp. 18 and 315.

22. James Dale, p. 353.

23. Lloyd W. Brown, Women Writers in Black Africa, p. 181.

24. James Dale, p. 348.

25. Rosalind Miles, p. 287.

5

INTRODUCTION TO NAYANTARA SAHGAL: REALISM AND IDEALISM

Nayantara Sahgal as an Indian woman novelist

The novels of Nayantara Sahgal are novels of ideas. In each of her works the conflict is centred less on drama than on debate, less on action than on argument. In all of them she uses real political crises as springboards for an interrogation of Indian values: the changes wrought by Independence in A Time To Be Happy, the division of a state in Storm in Chandigarh, the student riots of the Sixties in A Situation in New Delhi and the Emergency in Rich Like Us are just some of the issues she explores from a moral perspective. Unlike the protagonists in Markandaya's and Desai's work, Sahgal's characters are not so much complex individuals as symbols representative of a particular standpoint. As she has said, 'They are not anyone that one knows but they are a blend of many questions that one would like to see in a person'.[1] Hence they are not so much emotionally realised as ideologically conceived. This is not say that Sahgal's characters and her novels as a whole are emotionally sterile, but rather that the struggles embodied in the novels are shown to emerge from a specific political context, and are thus, as

Sahgal argues, solvable on a political basis. In The Day In Shadow Raj is shown to expostulate against the Indian divorce system in the following manner:

> 'It's the injustice of the thing... . It sort of puts one into a cold fury. An objective fury.' (p. 167)

His anger, which is directed against the injustice of a legal system that works against the interests of women, is put in cerebral terms. His passion is clearly contained within the bounds of reason. In this, as in all of Sahgal's novels, the polemic is the passion.

Personal Background: Acquisition of a Faith

Yet Sahgal's work has consistently been condemned as being overly journalistic and didactic. The many critics who lament the absence of 'vivid' characters in her novels, claiming that they 'remain intellectually rather than emotionally satisfying',[2] have failed to explore the source of Sahgal's commitment to the dictates of reason, and in so doing offer only partial critiques of her work. For her faith in reason is not merely an ideological construct, a convenient platform from which she can moralise and validate pet concerns; it is born of an urgent personal need to make sense of the world and a

professional desire to make the novel form an instrument of social and political change.

Nayantara Sahgal was born in 1927, the second of three daughters. Her parents were ardent and committed nationalists. Her maternal uncle was the leader of the Congress Party and the future Prime Minister of India. Her mother, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, became the first woman cabinet minister in India, and held several positions as both Ambassador and cabinet member after Independence. Her father, a scholar, died prematurely - his health jeopardised by lengthy stays in prison during the freedom struggle. Sahgal has ever since been deeply affected by the 'sacrifice' he and others like him made for his country.

From her earliest years Sahgal was made keenly aware of the public forces that shaped her existence. Her family completely gave themselves to the nationalist cause. They relinquished personal comforts in following Gandhi's injunctions to live simply, to dispense with ornamentation, and to wear khadi (homespun Indian white cotton). The frequent prison sentences served by Sahgal's parents meant that family life was completely disrupted. In a very real sense the personal became the political: Sahgal's view of the world was not one shaped by private

needs and desires, but one that defined itself in terms of broad, external political issues. For her, family discussions centred on world affairs and the progress of the Independence struggle - letters to her uncle Nehru show a twelve-year-old Sahgal earnestly asking for a definition of 'Communism'.[3] Recalling these days in her second autobiography Sahgal describes one of the results of such a lifestyle: the early appropriation of a 'crusading zeal'.

> We were intensely aware of the world beyond our domestic frontiers... . As children our miseries were not so much over pocket money or treats denied as over the injustices we read and heard about. The man next door got drunk and thrashed his servant. The Jews in Germany were treated like dirt. In some countries the black man could not sit beside the white man in a bus or a restaurant. The Untouchable could not enter the temple. We were moved to tears or anger, stirred by the crusading zeal of the very young. Why, why did it have to be like that?[4]

This is a zeal which Sahgal has kept with her throughout her life, and one that is clearly evident in her fiction. Compelled, as in Brecht's words, to 'think feelingly and feel thoughtfully'[5] at a very early age, Sahgal comes to advocate reason and moderation with a paradoxically passionate zeal.

This apparent contradiction fuels Sahgal's fiction. Her work draws upon both the moral idealism she formed as

a child and her early awareness of the public, material world. The two form a complex dynamic in her fiction that many critics have failed to recognise. One critic has referred to the tendency to see Sahgal as a propagandist, 'a naive moralist' whose novels are 'exhortative if not altogether didactic'.[6] Another has claimed, in terms that clearly undermine her argument, that Sahgal is essentially an 'objective' writer - one whose novels describe 'a faith in rationality and moderation in political as well as personal levels, [and] an awareness that these are endangered values which must be fought for'.[7] Both these critics, in different ways, reduce her work to the level of a social or political tract, and fail to examine its formal and ideological complexity. This complexity, born from the polar dynamic between the moral and materialist perspectives, is one which I will show to have increased significantly over the years.

Political Influences: Gandhian Ideology in Sahgal's Work

The two key ideological influences in Sahgal's writing are Gandhi and Nehru. She has acknowledged the influence of both these men in interviews and in her autobiographical writing. Yet despite being the key figures of the Independence movement Gandhi and Nehru

embodied subtly different ideals and ideas. Let us briefly examine some of these ideas.

Gandhi espoused certain causes such as the return to a rural-based society and a revival of traditional craftsmanship; the need for the alleviation of the lot of oppressed groups, in particular the untouchables and women; a desire to find Indian solutions for Indian problems and a belief in national - in particular Hindu-Muslim - unity. These causes and concerns were channelled through a moral doctrine or faith in ahimsa (or non-violence) which was part of his larger programme of satyagraha - 'the way of truth'. As George Woodcock has shown, ahimsa stressed the importance 'not only to confront but also to convert the enemy' and was not only a means of resistance but also served as a 'philosophic basis [for] a total reconstruction of society in such a way that exercises of power and violence are eliminated'.[8]

Nehru, whilst profoundly influenced by Gandhi's ideal of non-violence, laid particular emphasis upon constitutional reform - on legislative change - and was receptive to particular 'western' ideas such as the value of industrialisation.

The influence of both men is evident in Sahgal's novels and autobiographies in which she repeatedly draws attention to the value of non-violence and explores the impact of constitutional change within India. Yet in her work we also find a tension - a belief on the one hand that Indian tradition provides the answers to India's problems and a view on the other that Indian tradition is in part responsible for some of the nation's problems. In her own words she finds the Indian heritage 'a great burden as well as a source of enrichment'.[9]

This dualistic perspective (one that has led to some confusion among critics)[10] means that she comes to extol a particular form of nationalist ideology - one that isolates the moral aspects of Gandhian thought, such as ahimsa and the importance of 'truth' - and some of the practical aspects of Nehru's ideas - the importance of moderation (a form of compromise) and of debate, and draws them together. It is a selectiveness which she sees as a fundamental principle of all Gandhian thought, claiming of Gandhi himself 'I think he had the genius to discover what was Indian about India, and pick out those ideas which were rooted ways of behaviour and reactions which have been the downfall of India'.[11]

It could also be claimed that Gandhian ideology has had a profound effect on the formal constituents of Sahgal's writing. This is evident in two key elements of her work: her allegiance to two contrasting forms of realism (the realism of Lukacs evident in her early work and Brechtian realism in the later novels), and the overtly topical tone of her novels. The first may derive from Gandhi's view that all writing must be based upon truth - upon 'one's own experiences'[12] - the second upon the stress he laid upon individual moral courage and the importance of non-violent political intervention. By writing in the realist form, by drawing upon real political events (and of course in her autobiographies upon real people too), and by using what one critic has called an 'exhortative'[13] tone Sahgal's work can be seen to fulfil many aspects of Gandhian teaching.

Before analysing the formal and thematic constituents of Sahgal's novels, mention must be made of the impact that the figure of Gandhi has had on Indo-Anglian fiction and on Sahgal's fiction in particular. He is now a mythical figure - someone who, whilst fitting the traditional Indian pattern of the the sannyasin (ascetic) who practises non-attachment in the search for Truth,[14] also, as Mukherjee has shown, appeals to the Christian ideal of the saint and martyr.[15] Whilst Sahgal (unlike

Markandaya) does not analyse the importance of the ascetic in her fiction, the conception of Christian martyrdom is one that is repeated in her novels and is of particular importance in her depiction of women.

Women in the 'Political Novel' and Selfhood in Sahgal's Autobiographies

Sahgal has acknowledged the need for an Indian form of writing - one that comes from the Indian context and addresses the needs of the Indian people.[16] She also feels she has developed one such culturally-centred genre - 'a whole style of political novel, which uses political background but *tells a story of human life against that*'. She feels it is one that emanates from the Indian social context as politics is 'very much an Indian thing' 'almost an obsession'.[17]

This form of novel which lends priority to a setting, a political event or political climate is one that corresponds to Derrett's definition of the Indo-Anglian novel - one in which characters are 'subservient to the background or setting'.[18] It is also a form of novel which gives priority to depicting the social totality, one which by portraying 'individual characters...as part of a narrative which locates them within the entire historical

dynamics of their society', is essentially realist in form.[19]

Yet as has been said earlier, and as the following pages will show, there is an increasing divergence between Sahgal's realist impulse and her moral idealism. This development in her oeuvre is marked by the different depictions of women in her texts. In the early novels women are shown to be the custodians of tradition but, as the discrepancy between Sahgal's idealism and the material conflict she depicts widens, so, in the later novels, women become symbols of a nation's hope. This shift in emphasis means that the women characters have increasing prominence in Sahgal's oeuvre. In her first novel A Time To Be Happy women characters are rather marginal, passive figures, though as one critic has argued there are already signs that the women characters and their suffering describe a symbolic dimension: Maya's childlessness is 'a symbol not a cause of her unhappiness'.[20] In her middle novel, The Day In Shadow, Sahgal comes to use one form of female oppression to describe another by drawing analogies between divorce laws and sati (or widow burning). This dual inscription of feminist protest is however subsumed within the context of Sahgal's principal concern, which is one of describing national corruption and greed. In her later novel Rich

Like Us Sahgal uses women's condition as an index of the erosion of moral values and of individual civil rights, and once more uses sati, an obvious example of their oppression, to reinforce moral polarisation. Sahgal's nationalism makes of the women in these later novels both the spokespeople for change and the prophets of doom.[21]

Sahgal's feminism, prominent in interviews, is thus absorbed in her fiction into a nationalist framework. She draws upon a diversity of forms of female oppression - student rape and enforced marriage in A Situation in New Delhi; the legal infringement of women's rights in A Day In Shadow; sati in Rich Like Us - as part of her broader concern with political corruption and national malaise. Whilst feminism in Sahgal's work shares with Markandaya's novels a preoccupation with national identity, it can also be seen to be fundamentally different. Whilst in Markandaya's work women's suffering is placed within the context of a morally ambiguous realm, in Sahgal's novels women's oppression becomes a significant, though by no means unique, conveyor of the misuse of power in a morally static world: in two of her novels, The Day in Shadow and Rich Like Us, Sahgal uses the specific oppression of sati (a subject hardly touched on by Markandaya and Desai) as a metaphor for social injustice.

This does not mean that Sahgal loses sight of the specificities of women's oppression but rather that she reinscribes these specificities into a broader framework. Just as Markandaya's early novels explored the correlation between female emancipation and the eradication of poverty, so Sahgal's texts show that the subjugation of women is part of a tyrannical hold of certain orthodox (Hindu) prescriptions such as fatalism and the unthinking allegiance to social codes and duties. This is particularly evident in her novel The Day In Shadow in which she interrogates the conception of passivity in the character of Simrit who is forced into a position of self-assertion when her husband tries to extract heavy financial penalties in their divorce settlement. Sahgal herself has told me in an interview[22] that Simrit is an example of what she calls a 'new model of the virtuous woman' which she has tried to present in her fiction. But as I will show in my analysis of the novel, Simrit far from choosing to assert herself is instead forced into a position of self-defence and has the assistance of a supportive man. Indeed she is one of a 'long line of suffering women'[23] in Sahgal's novels.

It is significant that given Sahgal's conscious attempt to create a 'new model of a virtuous woman' - a model which she described to me as a radical departure

from the accepted ideals of virtuous womanhood based upon 'self-immolation and self-sacrifice': a 'woman who will not submit to being effaced...[who] walks into the world where she takes risks [and] has the courage to make a new identity [for herself]' - that so many of her women characters are either victims (such as Rose in Rich Like Us) or, derive their identities from men (such as Devi in A Situation in New Delhi).[24] These women are courageous, but they are also shown to either occupy (or be forced into) a subservient place in the public setting of Sahgal's fiction. The divergence between the feminist aims she expresses in her interview and the fictional results seems to me to be yet another sign of the disjunction between her moral idealism and her allegiance to realism.

Sahgal's women characters are distinctive in that they are expressive of a certain individualism, leaving their husbands and actively pursuing careers as well as numerous sexual relationships within and outside marriage.[25] Yet this break with convention is integrated into - as Jasbir Jain has shown - a wider concern with ethics. For example, she has described her women characters' break with tradition as significant because it is 'an ethical development'.[26] Sahgal does not promote an

empty individualism so much as describe the importance of having the courage of your convictions.

Yet such individualism is absent from Sahgal's earliest work - her autobiographies and her first novel, A Time To Be Happy. As I will show in my next chapter, Sahgal's autobiographies project a conception of selfhood that is subsumed within history.[27] The overwhelming awareness evident in these early works that the individual man or woman is part of a larger process of historical and political change is significant. For Sahgal's feminism is inextricably entwined with her nationalism, and can be seen to be a reflection of her own changing attitude to her country. Her contribution to Indian literary feminism rests in the way she ties women's experience to a shifting historical and cultural landscape - one that for her has its beginnings in the Indian nationalist movement but has very recently come to draw upon the wider context of international feminism in her depiction of the suffragette movement in Plans For Departure. The following study of Sahgal's feminism places it securely within her wider concern with social injustice: revealing, through a study of Sahgal's divergent impulses towards both moral idealism and realist enterprise, the particular vision of social oppression, change and transformation that is to be found in her work.

The Autobiographies and Novels

The dynamic between Sahgal's ideological and formal allegiances is found in her autobiographies. In my first chapter I will explore the complex relationship between Sahgal's autobiographies and her fictions. In the autobiographies Sahgal does more than describe the events that lead up to Independence: her historically linear narratives are charged with a moral idealism that shapes historical fact into a coherent, celebratory nationalist framework. Sahgal rewrites history in terms of a set of values and priorities - essentially Gandhian in nature - which she regards as vital to the effective development of post-Independent India. The autobiographies constitute a powerful political myth, a myth of national identity, which - to borrow Henry Tudor's terms - finds its justification not so much in historical evidence, as in the moral and political truths it implies.[28]

Not surprisingly, these moral and political truths are essential elements of all Sahgal's novels. But because these truths are static, and emerge from a specific period of history, they increasingly lose their authority within Sahgal's representation of the process of historical evolution after Independence. This thus explains the

growing gap in Sahgal's novels between the author's moral idealism and the material reality she depicts.

In my second chapter I embark on a formal analysis of five of her eight novels, and identify an increasing divergence between Sahgal's critical impulse - which draws on Brechtian techniques of generic multiplicity, formal fragmentation and spatial structure - and her desire to maintain the validity of a moral framework that she is unable to reconcile with the material reality she describes.

Notes and References

1. Nayantara Sahgal, 'An Interview', ILR, p. 12.
2. S. A. Narayan, 'India', JCL, (1986), p. 83; and Marcia P. Liu, 'Continuity and Development in the Novels of

Nayantara Sahgal', p. 50.

3. Sahgal, Prison and Chocolate Cake, p. 95.

4. Sahgal, From Fear Set Free, p. 43.

5. Brecht quoted in Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, p. 67.

6. S. Krishna Sarma, 'Positive Living', pp. 166 and 167.

7. Marcia Liu, p. 51.

8. George Woodcock, Gandhi, pp. 11 and 100.

9. Sahgal, 'Interview', p. 11.

10. S. Krishna Sarma for example believes that she endeavours 'to examine and validate ...traditional Indian mores'. Op. cit., p. 167.

11. Sahgal, 'Interview', p. 8.

12. Gandhi, 'Why I Write', quoted in Rama Jha, 'The Influence of Gandhian thought on Novelists of the Thirties and Forties', pp. 167 and 166.

13. Sarma, p. 167.

14. Woodcock, p. 11.

15. M. Mukherjee, The Twice-Born Fiction, p. 105.

16. Sahgal, see 'Interview', p. 9.

17. Ibid., p. 10.

18. M.E. Derrett, The Modern Indian Novel in English, p. 57.

19. Lunn on Lukacs, Marxism and Modernism, p. 78.

20. Jasbir Jain, 'Sexual Relations in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal', p. 42.

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22. The interview took place on 29 August 1989.

24. As Marcia Liu has pointed out 'even Sahgal's strongest women characters have been formed almost entirely by men'. Op. cit., p. 52.

25. Linda Richter has pointed out that extra-marital affairs are an element more present in Hindi publications than in English ones. Linda Richter, 'Roles of Women in Indian Magazine Fiction', p. 90.

26. Jain, op. cit: Jain has argued that in Sahgal's novels sex in or outside marriage is 'to be viewed with reference to a situation and an attitude and no single rule can help judge it', p. 47; Sahgal, 'Interview', p. 11.

27. This sense of self- diminution emerged in my interview: when I asked her whether she might write another autobiography she said she wouldn't because she was a 'boring' person and that she was completely absorbed by her writing - a process that meant that 'one disappears into the words on the page' till one had no identity left.

28. See Henry Tudor, Political Myth, pp. 135-36.

Inserted footnotes:

21. In Sahgal's novels sati constitutes a metaphor of both female oppression and national moral corruption.

23. Jasbir Jain, 'The Politics of Hinduism in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal', p. 46.

6

GENRE, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND FICTION

Importance of the Autobiographies

Nayantara Sahgal is not only a novelist. She is also an historian who has made a comprehensive study of Indira Gandhi's political style, and a journalist - a job described by John Pilger as involving 'a process of weaving together the strands of contemporary history'.[1] She in fact came to write fiction by default: the success of the first of her two autobiographies, Prison And Chocolate Cake (1954), led her to consider writing novels as well. Any study of Sahgal's novels must therefore show an understanding of her other ventures as a writer.

Sahgal's autobiographies provide a useful point of entry into a study of her novels - not least because the novels are set in the corridors of power to which she had privileged access as a child. The characters in her novels - politicians, bureaucrats, intellectuals and the business élite - are drawn from the social milieu with which she was most familiar as a child. Sometimes individual characters, such as Anna in Plans For Departure, are drawn directly from life, and a study of

the autobiographies can prove illuminating in this respect.

What is more, Sahgal's autobiographies provide more than just a reference for the raw material or substance of her fiction. They provide an important insight into her key ideological and formal preoccupations. Sahgal's autobiographies reveal a clearly defined conception of history, and a view of writing itself as a political tool. The autobiographical genre is one that describes a revisionism, a sense of self and history being made and remade in the context of the present, or, in the words of Louis Renza, an 'endless prelude'.[2] This form and vision is one that Sahgal transposes onto her temporally linear but open-ended novels: in both her novels and autobiographies she is a weaver of contemporary history.

Finally, Sahgal's peculiarly extroitive autobiographies demonstrate the way in which Sahgal the child - as an apparent onlooker of life's stage - effaces herself from her own narrative. Through them we see the formation of a writer whose sense of self is derived from her historical allegiances. What follows in my study is therefore not a psychoanalytical reading for, as Friedman has shown, 'psychoanalytic models of the autobiographical self remain fundamentally individualistic',[3] but rather

an exploration of some of the ideological perspectives and fictional antecedents inherent in Sahgal's earliest work.

History as Fiction, Fiction as History

Foucault and others have argued that all writing is discourse thus claiming for writing a necessary and irreducible historicity.[4] Certainly, history forms both the context and content of all Sahgal's writing. This means that there is no rigid formal demarcation between her autobiographies and her novels. (Indeed, as Sahgal recounted to me in a private conversation, one of her readers once mistook Sahgal's first autobiography for a novel.) The autobiographies are heavily fictionalised, reducing lesser characters to types or embodiments of particular virtues, and giving mythical status to the more important historical actors. Equally, her novels are so entwined in actual historical circumstance that, in both content and style, they often read like a political record or diary.

Sahgal would be the first to accept this view. She clearly subscribes to a concept of historical 'authenticity' that applies to both her fictional and her non-fictional writing: both are necessarily rooted in, and critical of, society at large. This accords fully with Avrom Fleishman's thesis in The English Historical Novel:

Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf. He argues that the historical novelist and the historian have a common purpose. Both attempt 'to find meaning in otherwise meaningless data, to rethink and complete the rationale of covert and often duplicitous behaviour, to reconstruct the nexus of past action'.[5] Both bring to bear on the raw material of history the resources of imagination.

In Sahgal's case, what ultimately links her fiction and her non-fiction is a conception of history as a shaping force. This is in keeping with Lukacs's definition of a historical novelist. In The Historical Novel Lukacs describes how the early novel form - particularly as used by Walter Scott - embodied a conception of history as process. This process is mediated through characters who 'in their psychology and destiny, always represent social trends and historical forces'. The historical novel does not simply re-tell great historical events; it aims to achieve 'the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events'.[6]

Here,in the notion of poetic awakening, is the convergence of history and imagination at the heart of Sahgal's work. Here too is the reason for her one-dimensional characters, her 'typical' characters who embody the spirit and morality of the age. And here also is the source of her allegiance, an allegiance embodied by

Gandhi himself, to the idea of sacrifice and nobility in the face of historical necessity.

In the following pages I shall demonstrate how Sahgal's novels and autobiographies share a common conception of history; the ways in which this conception can be seen to derive from Sahgal's privileged class position; and how her tendency to idealise the Independence struggle circumscribes and limits her understanding of history as a process that demands the constant renegotiation of political values and priorities.

Realism in Prison and Chocolate Cake (1954)

Narrative Voice: The Onlooker and The Idealist

The most notable feature of Sahgal's first autobiography is its attempt to present an objective account of the personal and historical past and its paradoxically indulgent, eulogistic quality. There appears to be a split in the narrative voice - what Elbaz has described as a '"split intentionality"...by the vacillation between person and persona' in autobiography[7] - so that from the very first she describes her personal history as part of a 'spectacle'. In her Preface Sahgal describes her position as that of a passive onlooker and

chronicler of historical events. But she clearly cannot hide her personal feelings:

> We [sisters] grew up at a time when India was the stage for a great political drama, and we shall always remain a little dazzled by the performance we have seen. (p. 9)

From the first, then, it is clear that Sahgal sees herself as a privileged spectator who is overawed by the events she has been witness to. The autobiography will be a story not so much of her own past but of her country's history; not so much a reflective confessional as a paean of praise. It reflects a conception of self as a 'conscious political identity' - a key feature of post-colonial autobiography where 'the "self"...is not an individual with a private career, but a soldier with a long historic march toward Canaan'.[8] This position of committed chronicler is one that many of Sahgal's fictional narrators - for example the unnamed narrator in A Time To Be Happy and Michael Calvert in A Situation in New Delhi - share.

A Hierarchy of Characters

Sahgal's position of enthusiastic spectator is reflected in the presentation of people from her past as idealised characters. Uncle Nehru, Papu and Gandhi hold a

near mythical status within the autobiographies. She describes her father as 'the handsomest, the most lovable, kind and understanding person I knew' (p. 12), and Nehru as 'our uncontested hero' (p. 128) 'to me he resembled a knight in quest of the Grail... much more than a Prime Minister' (p. 211), and says (of herself and her sisters), 'our feeling for him came as close to adoration as it did for anybody' (p. 130). She habitually romanticises the people to whom she is closest but Nehru, in particular, is apotheosised and shown as a moral crusader or saint who has 'taken upon himself the burden of the cross' (p. 222).

In the process Sahgal's position within her own autobiography is made clear. In the 'epic hierarchy of events and objects' that is symptomatic of the realist text[9] hers is a lesser role. It is as if she tries to efface herself into anonymity, engaging in what Patricia Meyer Spacks has described as a form of female rhetoric in autobiographical discourse which results, paradoxically, in 'the suppression of narrative about the self'.[10] This suppression however is less a symptom of social oppression[11] than an indication that Sahgal draws her sense of identity from a nationalist background where she has 'been denied by history the illusion of individualism'.[12] (Indeed, individualism is perceived by Saghal as the principal threat to democracy, and

constitutes her main charge against Indira Gandhi in her study of her cousin in Indira Gandhi: Her Road To Power.) In one passage Sahgal describes how she experiences the curious contradictions of her position as a child (whose role is necessarily limited) living in a house dominated by political events that are shaping the history of the country. She wants to be one with the crowds, 'the huge brown blur' of her later autobiography (From Fear Set Free, p. 30), whilst watching Nehru addressing them from a balcony:

> It was awe-inspiring to see a mammoth crowd moved to adoration ... All at once I became one of those anonymous faces outside, gazing with complete belief and affection at the man who stood before them. The little girl behind the windows was on the wrong side of it. She should have been out in the garden with those others with whom she felt a strange and sudden kinship. (pp. 50-51)

The natural awe in which Sahgal-the-child holds Nehru carries through to the adult Sahgal's portrayal of India's nationalist leadership - an uncritical view which prevents her fulfilling the realist promise of identifying and analysing the complex movement of history. Sahgal's participation in historical events is largely an emotional one. This results in an unbalanced perspective so that she sees her past as if it were part of a fairy-tale. 'I had grown up', she writes at the end of Prison, 'within a magic circle' (p. 223). This term is reappropriated in her later novel A Situation In New Delhi together with many

others that invest the nationalist movement with other-worldly powers. Nehru's father for instance is described as suffering a 'conversion' ,and the nation is 'bewitched' by Gandhi (p. 62)). The autobiography is fabular and hagiographic, peopled with heroes (Nehru, her father and Gandhi), a heroine (her mother),and an enchanted past. This goes beyond the criteria that Lukacs used to describe the realist text:

> Lukacs defined realism as a literary mode in which the lives of individual characters were portrayed as part of a narrative which situated them within the entire historical dynamics of their society. Through the retrospective voice great realist novels contain an epic hierarchy of events and objects, and reveal what is essential and significant in the historically conditioned transformation of individual character.[13]

Sahgal is less the omniscient narrator in this text than the privileged and partisan observer. Her position is correspondingly transposed onto the portrayal of the lesser characters, or 'extras', in her narrative. Hari, one of the servants, is a key example of a potentially realist character that is used to perpetuate Sahgal's personal prejudices. He plays the part of the resident fool or court-jester in Sahgal's drama, describing 'both the depiction of full individuality and historical typicality' that Lukacs emphasised was integral to realist characterisation.[14] Yet Sahgal's makes her own prejudices apparent when she describes his election to the

Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh in 1936: 'The little waif had come a long way in life' (p. 86), she writes, condescendingly. (In her second autobiography she revises this patronising view somewhat: writing of another family servant and retainer, Sundar, she says: 'I saw him for the first time as a human being and not as the muttering, shuffling gnome so much a part of my childhood' (Fear, p. 87).)

Indeed servants, when not used to add colour to Prison, serve the purpose of fleshing out the ideological and political thrust of the narrative. It is almost as if Sahgal refines out of Indian history the mass of Indian people; they become little more than part of the geography - an undifferentiated blur. They are the 'material' of great causes and the grateful recipients of honours. In other words they constitute a group who are to be worked upon by the leaders (who remain the prime movers of history for Sahgal), and granted privileges that are bestowed upon them by their generous rulers.

In Sahgal's mythology, then, Independence constitutes the replacing of one 'bad' leadership by another 'good' one. This attitude is one that is given voice by all of Sahgal's key characters, including that of her father:

> It was for men such as Rama [their gardener], Papu always asserted, that India's freedom must be

> achieved; for it was to them, the simple, gentle people , that the soil of India really belonged. (p. 89)

Whilst presenting a surface realism Sahgal has clearly not taken on the ideological stance that is concomitant with realist narrative structures. (Lukacs for example prescribes the presentation of characters, the 'people', as the agents, and not merely the subjects, of history.) This results in part from Sahgal's peculiar position within her own historically-centred autobiography. Her child's-eye view of a prominent political family's experience of the nationalist movement means that her access to events that 'would now be a chapter in a history book' (p. 207) is necessarily constrained. It results in her presentation of history as engulfing the subject and, more specifically, a tendency both to eulogise the Independence struggle, stripping it of its harsh edges and elevating it to the level of a spiritual movement, and at the same time to ascribe to herself the authority of giving a comprehensive and impartial account of events.

The Construction of a National 'Totality'

One of the key elements of a realist text is the construction of a social 'totality'.[15] The construction is meant to show the organic, mutable nature of society. Sahgal's realism denies this quality. Her tendency to both

abstract and idealise the nationalist movement in Prison lead her to present a static myth of the Indian nation as a unified whole; a nation that has a classical past and that fulfils, through Independence, a preordained historical destiny. The construction of this myth of a unified and coherent national and historical identity, it can be argued, has its beginnings in her child's impressionability - one that leads her to perceive the national struggle as a moral crusade.

Sahgal consistently uses religious language - a terminology also found in her fiction - in her description of the national struggle. She sees Gandhi as a spiritual leader rather than a political one, and emphasises the moral basis of his arguments for Independence. Gandhi, Sahgal writes, 'transformed politics into prayer' (p. 174). It appears that she extracts from the doctrine of satyagraha, or 'the way of truth' whereby 'the right means must be employed to obtain the right ends...nothing great and good can be built upon a soiled foundation' (p. 215), a religiosity that distracts attention away from the political pragmatism that was also an essential part of the movement. (Gandhi used moral arguments to work upon the British ideal of fair play and to hurt the collective colonial conscience.) In her terms the Congress Party taking part in the pre-Independence '36 election becomes a 'pilgrim' whose success depended on

'the measure of dedication to its cause'; and the resulting success shows that 'there was a corner of the world where asceticism could walk hand in hand with politics' (p. 71).

This tendency to apotheosise the movement shows a blindness to the contradictions of ethnic unrest and violence that were also a prominent feature of the Independence struggle. Through it Sahgal is able to construct an image of a pan-Indian identity that is a necessary fiction of the nationalist movement, but has little relevance outside it. (During the course of her writing career this construction changes, yet it remains as a reference for the ideal India that Independence made possible but which was betrayed by the mismanagement of post-Independence governments.) Sahgal clings to this conception of national identity even though it works against the realist presentation of life that she tries to document not only in her fiction but also in this autobiography.

Yet it could be argued that this construction of an Indian identity is not only framed by her private, idealistic perception of the personal and historical past, but also by historical contingency. (This is of course true.) Her work shares many of the features found in the work of other writers who began writing just before or

after Independence: the absorption of Gandhian rhetoric and the self-conscious explanations of the niceties of Indian culture show that she is trying to forge a conception of Indian identity that draws from a pre-colonial past. Like Markandaya, she constructs a rural ideal, and conceives of her culture holistically. Take for example the following:

> Music is an integral part of Indian life, as it can only be of a civilisation which has not yet come to rely completely on machines ... Perhaps there is something about the slow, jogging motion of a bullock-cart upon an open road which urges the driver to sing or the swaying rhythm of a row of women carrying baskets of newly-cut grass ... which persuades melody out of them. We were not aware of the reasons but we were conscious of the fact that Indians sang and danced as freely as they breathed. (p. 109)

The terms she uses in this passage are remarkably similar to those of Raja Rao, another contemporary, who in his preface to Kanthapura argued for an Indian style of writing.[16] What distinguishes Sahgal from other post-Independence Gandhian writers however is the way in which in which she, an ostensibly realist writer, tries to promote traditional, Gandhian ideals in the face of widespread social and historical change.

Hindu Womanhood Idealised

There is a corresponding mixture of idealism and nationalist affirmation in Sahgal's presentation of Indian women. Apart from the first novel, A Time To Be Happy, Prison is the only text in which Sahgal draws a completely uncritical picture of their position. Their condition is eternalised and sanctified: myth feeds into reality; an alternative - and some might argue, misleading - portrait is affirmed for the sake of defining a distinct 'Indianness'. Writing of her great-aunt Bibima who was 'widowed at an early age, [and] devoted her life to the care of her fragile young sister' (p. 53), Sahgal dilutes her socially-inscribed self-sacrifice, and transforms it into an example of noble Hindu widowhood:

> She made the Hindu approach to life a reality for us not through words for she was not a learned woman, but through her own extreme simplicity, her deep religiousness and her tranquil calm faith in the goodness of God. (p. 57)

In uncritically drawing from Hindu models to substantiate her conception of national identity, Sahgal lapses into sanctioning and idealising some of the very injustices that the Independence movement sought to eradicate. It seems that she absorbs the Gandhian injunction of passive resistance and self-sacrifice (which were designed to meet specific political ends) to

such an extent that she presents it as an eternal and self-sustaining doctrine. In Prison it is clear to what extent the affirmation of national identity is made at the expense of critical acuity: Sahgal describes how as a child she complained that all the princesses in her storybooks had long, golden hair, and her father is shown supplying an alternative Indian mythology to console her. The anecdote is worth quoting in full because it proves to what extent history and myth are entwined in Sahgal's perception of national identity. The stories of mythical characters and historical personages are sealed in a classical continuum that works to uphold the notion of dignity in suffering, death and self-sacrifice:

> He told me of the lonely, delicately nurtured princess Sita, the ideal of all Indian women, whose selfless devotion to her husband, Rama, led her to share his fourteen-year exile in the jungle, though she could have lived in luxury in the palace. He spoke of Savitri, who so loved her husband, Satyavana, that when Yama, the God of Death, came to claim him as had been preordained, her inspired pleas won his life again. I listened rapt to the tales of the courageous Rajput women who, when their menfolk were defeated in battle, chose to end their lives by leaping into a fire rather than face disgrace and dishonour at the hands of the enemy. Then there was the beautiful empress Mumtaz Mahal, to whose memory a sorrowful Mughal emperor Shah Jehan, built the Taj Mahal. More recently there had been the gallant Rani of Jhansi who in the nineteenth century had unsuccessfully but valiantly led her troops to battle against the British. (pp. 63-64)

A faith in noble suffering is clearly a Gandhian belief shared by many other writers including Kamala

Markandaya. However, Sahgal's ideal is different from Markandaya's in one important respect: Markandaya's heroines are stoics who show courage in the face of unavoidable suffering; Sahgal's heroines are martyrs who gain honour through putting themselves through hardship and even death. The extent of Sahgal's idealism must be emphasised if we are to understand the nature of the protest and disillusionment to be found later in her novels.

It is clear that Sahgal's conception of national identity and the position of women is framed by the ideals of the nationalist movement. Gandhi's faith in the value of traditional ways, his promotion of the rural ideal and of non-violence, are all values that are upheld in Sahgal's novels. But Sahgal goes much further than Gandhi: she claims for India an historical understanding of democracy and equality, and uses her personal past as historical proof of this thesis. Hence her description of her mother's pioneering appointment as the first woman cabinet minister in the country is presented as an historical (rather than a personal) event yet is contained within Sahgal's specific, and characteristic, view of Indian history:

> No woman had held such a position before but the concept of the equality of men and women was not foreign to Indian thought. Often buried deep by custom and convention through the centuries, it had

> nevertheless, existed since ancient times when a wife had been a man's honoured and equal partner. Sanskrit literature referred to a wife as ardhangini meaning 'half the being' essential to the composition of the harmonious whole. This concept outlived all attempts to subdue it and emerged once again under Gandhi's guidance. (p. 74)

A key word here is 'concept'. As in her novels, Sahgal is happier dealing with concepts rather than realities, showing a desire for objectivity that is curbed by idealism. The autobiographies show to what extent she imposes preconceived notions onto the depiction of the world around her, and at what an early stage in her writing career her ideals were formed.

Sahgal's tendency to abstract from the realities around her to prove her personal theories, and to make claims for an autonomous Indian identity and a distinct identity for Indian women, do more than simply lead to generalisations. Other writers, after all, show a similar tendency for abstraction: Markandaya's novels promote a distinct Indian identity, and Desai appears to argue for a 'separate sphere' for women. Sahgal's autobiography, however, does much more. Prison ignores the reality of the way most Indian women live in order to make a political point. From the earliest Sahgal's work propagates a political myth and avoids the niceties of considered criticism. In the following passage she blinds herself to many of the realities of the Independence struggle:

> Indian women did not have to march in suffragette processions to proclaim their equality with men or don bloomers in place of their feminine garb. No such measures were necessary. Gandhi's call to women to take part in the national movement beside their men brought them forward as if they had been born to such a life - as if they had been born to make political speeches from the public platform, suffer blows when the police attacked their peaceful gatherings and spend months at a time in jail separated from their children. It was a curious happy-go-lucky type of self-imposed discipline. Mummie was only one of those stout-hearted women. (p. 75)

This passage is misleading in many ways for not only were the mass of Indian women rural or working class, and had no need to dress differently - least of all in Western clothes - in order to protest: they were also fighting primarily for a nationalist cause rather than a feminist one. Moreover Sahgal's mother, born into one of the most prominent and Westernised of Indian families, was a leader, and not one of the masses, and the description of the actions of the majority of Indian women during the Independence struggle as 'a curious happy-go-lucky type of self-imposed discipline' makes a mockery of the hardships they endured.

However, the passage does reveal an important factor in the autobiographical 'aesthetics of reception'[17] - namely, that Sahgal's autobiography with its frequent explanations of Indian culture and tradition is geared toward a Western audience. If autobiographical writing is the process of the creation of a public persona or

multiple public personae, as Elbaz has argued,[18] then the autobiographies of those, such as Sahgal, whose lives are clearly affected by nationalist struggles automatically involve a process of public self-definition which is framed within the context of defining national identity.

To conclude,in Prison Sahgal shows herself to be completely caught up in constructing a fiction - her own personal myth of the Independence movement. In doing so she sets herself certain ideals that are bound to collapse in the light of the post-Independence dawn. In her second autobiography, From Fear Set Free, she describes her early married years. In it we can see the tenacious way in which she clings to her dream in the face of uncomfortable realities and the way in which the conflict results in a new, harder narrative voice - a new conception of herself, a new public persona.

From Fear Set Free (1962): The Emergence of Protest

Sahgal's second autobiography shows her considering her ideals in the light of certain realities. Where Prison presented a self-assured, eulogistic and idealistic version of the personal and historical past, From Fear Set Free is a self-conscious text that shows Sahgal

confronting difficulties and undergoing a crisis of identity. The difference of outlook can be seen in the titles of the works: Prison and Chocolate Cake associates the realities of the the struggle for Independence with a childhood 'treat' and From Fear Set Free, seems to describe Sahgal's awakening to, and overcoming of, adult responsibilities.

This autobiography covers the early years of Sahgal's first marriage, which was to end, some years later, in divorce. Whereas Prison was centred around securities - Sahgal's childhood and the certain birth of Indian Independence - Fear draws from Sahgal's search for an identity after her return from college in the States to a newly-independent country. The organic, emotional link between the personal and the historical that was evident in Prison is not sustained in Fear. The narrative voice in this autobiography is discursive, journalistic, and, at times, strained. Instead of eulogy and praise Sahgal expresses doubts on three of the key issues on which she showed firm convictions in Prison - the unity of the Indian nation, the 'equal' position of women in the country and her own position within the nation.

It seems that personal experience (though it is hardly ever specified) comes to undermine her public convictions and ideals. It appears that her struggle to

maintain her early convictions, in the light of mature reflection, results in a new narrative voice - an exhortative one, that is to be found . . in all her early and middle novels except for A Time To Be Happy.

From Fear Set Free describes a process of self-discovery. Set in the early Fifties when modern India was embarking on the process of self-government, it opens with Sahgal discovering that she has nothing to do, no purpose in life (in stark contrast to her parents), and no definite plans for either a career or marriage. Yet at first she distances herself from her material by discussing the life of others and placing this within a specific social and historical context. The autobiographical detail is enmeshed with observations on the social position of women: the early pages of the text consider the position of widowhood that Mrs Pandit, Sahgal's mother, finds herself and presents her - a widow who lives a full and energetic life - as an aberration from the norm in which prevailing customs such as 'the wearing of white, like a nun's habit, the discarding of jewellery and the complete withdrawal from ordinary life' (p. 12) are still practised.

It is immediately clear that Sahgal's perspective has changed since Prison. She has become aware of the fact that she is not representative of the majority of Indians;

she has become critical of Indian customs; and she voices her desire to see some customs changed. Yet, in expressing protest, she collapses her anger at the actual practice of customs into an attack on their ideological roots; she continues: 'But like other originally purposeful measures they had become the sterile symbols of a section of Hindu society that had itself remained intellectually static for too long' (p. 12). (In her novels we will see the same tendency to reduce her protest against real injustice to an ideological level.) It is as if she is trying to maintain her position of an impartial observer but finds that her own emotions get in the way.

The Westernised Indian and The Problem of Identity

The move towards uncertainty is, in part, a result of a new self-consciousness and insecurity in the narrator. In Fear Sahgal describes some of the difficulties facing élite Indians such as herself in forging a discrete identity when their entire education was based on a British model. As is so often the case, her description begins with generalisations that are collapsed into personal terms:

> Formal education in British India was remarkable for its lack of connection with its Indian environment ... Our textbooks had been compiled by Englishmen for English children, of whom there were none in my school and few in any school on India. ... Indians were called 'natives' in our history book. The chasm

> of value between school and home completed our confusion. (p. 197)

The alienating influence of a Western education is unwittingly exemplified by Sahgal herself when she describes herself from the standpoint of an European observer:

> We had, little brown-skinned children that we were, learned to be acutely conscious of our Indian heritage as our grandfather's generation had been of its western awakening. (p. 178)

Here the narrator is clearly divided: her acquisition of her Indian heritage is 'learned' and to some extent forced; her description (perhaps ironic) of herself as a 'little brown-skinned' child shows that she has already grown foreign to herself. Sahgal's frequent and full explanations of the Indian context throughout Fear reinforce this sense of alienation in the narrative voice. It is as if Sahgal is trying, unsuccessfully so far, to subsume her self-consciousness within the authoritative voice of the impartial observer.

As in Prison, Sahgal's second autobiography shows that her position as onlooker is as much a result of privilege as youth. This distance between her and the majority of the Indian people allows her to

sentimentalise, idealise and extract from the observations of real poverty around her an ephemeral beauty:

> As a child I had called the section of Allahabad beyond the stone arch 'the headache place', but I had been fascinated by it nevertheless. Its dirt and its flies were repellent, and yet it contained unexpected fragments of beauty, opening a doorway to a wealth of imagining. ... The past, always immanent, was linked to us by these people. A walk, an expression, a cast of feature was identical to that in a painting, described in a poem, or carved on the wall of some ancient temple. (p. 77)

The narrator in Fear is different from the impressionable and excluded child in Prison for whom 'the world of make-believe was more vivid and important...than that of reality' (Prison, p. 63). She is more clearly defined now, and has acquired a hard edge. There is coldness, a tendency to see people either (as in the above passage) as the subjects of a 'painting' or through a statistical and ethnographic grid as the subjects of a sociological study. Her description of a family servant, whom she sees after a long absence, which has earlier been quoted, is a good example.[19] It is followed by an explanation that he is a landless peasant and a long account of the historical and sociological background of such labourers. The distance of the writer from the world about her is clearly demarcated.

The Position of Women Reviewed

On the level of personal narrative, the autobiography begins with Sahgal's discovery on her return to India that she has no definite aims. Her mother, now a widow and engrossed with her political work, makes clear that she believes Sahgal should marry:

> The future, for a woman, in my mother's opinion, began with marriage and children ... Girls were...only potential till they married. Marriage made them actual, brought them to full flower, drew out all the hidden best in them. (p. 19)

The very boldness with which Sahgal states her mother's views gives way to wry cynicism when she describes her own views on customary attitudes to eligible, young women:

> If you were a girl it did not matter whether you were cross-eyed, bow-legged or bald; so long as you had a fair complexion your chances of a good marriage ranked high. (p. 48)

The contrast between her mother's self-assurance and Sahgal's circumspection points to a fluctuation in the narrative voice - a creative tension through which Sahgal can be seen to articulate an independent outlook and the beginnings of protest. Throughout the text Sahgal scrutinises Indian customs and traditions, all that

constitutes her conception of national identity, revealing both disillusionment and hope.

Her conflicting feelings are focussed around her new awareness of some of the realities of women's position in India. Protest does not come quickly or easily to Sahgal. She tries to hold on to her ideal vision of the country. The tension between her idealism and her desire for accuracy is clearly evident in a passage where she begins with what appears to be praise for the traditional Indian marriage with its custom of maintaining the system of separate spheres (an approach later undermined by a diatribe against segregation - see p. 127), and then, after a brief description of such marriages, moves on to uphold the importance of duty. The movement from praise to uncertainty to stern tolerance of the Indian marriage describes the emotional and ideological development to be found throughout the text:

> Married couples were solidly couples, not merely two people living under the same roof. ... They did not go their separate ways except in so far as the ways of a man and a woman are separate, and neither was anxious to infringe on the other's. If a man played tennis or golf over the weekend ... his wife did not grudge him these pastimes though she did not share them. If she had a baby to nurse she nursed it and her husband did not feel left out by her attentions to the infant. ...And if they turned their backs on each other in the bedroom or never spoke when they were alone, no one knew it ... Children did not often have to suffer homes where arguments needled the air, because they were the common treasure that must on no

> account pay for their parents' unhappiness. (pp. 50-51)

The movement from praise for the system to stoic acceptance of it is heightened by the starchy, matronly tone the passage later acquires:

> Not all marriages were healthy or stable, but arranged marriage on the whole was a solid stable structure ... built on the theory that affection and mutual regard could reasonably be expected to flourish between partners of the same social, religious and provincial background. (p. 51)

Happiness, it now seems, is a by-product of duty. The movement from praise to stern tolerance reveals an important emotional and ideological difference between Prison and Fear, and reveals the restraint that Sahgal is forced to adopt when trying to hold on to her faith in an ideal India. As will be seen, the inevitable tension between her idealism and the reality she attempts to document results in her acquisition of a detached, 'public' voice of protest.

Sahgal tries to keep her reflections on marriage as impersonal as possible. She puts herself at a distance from her subject, and makes clear that hers was not a typical Indian marriage in that it was not arranged. She chooses her husband, Gautam, a businessman. She writes that she marries partly because she wants to enter a new

world, and partly out of a desire to build a 'normal' life for herself - one that will take her out of the politically-centred world of her childhood.

Yet clearly some radical adjustments have to be made as she moves from 'the atmosphere of a personal crusade to one of commerce' (p. 81) - adjustments that strike at the very heart of her early ideals. She describes her husband as 'an Indian to whom Gandhi was just a name and freedom for his country an event that deprived him of his home and part of his inheritance' (p. 35). 'Our mutual attraction [was] unsupported by any common tastes' (p. 35), she writes, and goes on to describe him in terms that show him to be the very opposite of her ideals: 'he tackled problems with a figurative lawn-mower' (p. 36), his 'impatience...merged from small intolerances to a rejection of non-violence' (p. 234). In short, in her description of Gautam we see an early portrait of the villain-figure of her novels.

Sahgal's sense of isolation in her new role as a business-man's wife is compounded by the lack of companionship from her husband (who prefers male company and is completely uninterested in the medical aspect of her pregnancies (p. 117)), her frustration at the limitations of her role as mother ('The maternal instinct

was not proving very instinctive' (p.138)), and by a change in residence to Bombay where:

> I knew only a narrow section [of the city's life] where interest inevitably was confined to husbands' jobs and revolved around pills, talcum powder, insecticide or whatever your husbands' firm might be engaged in manufacturing and marketing. (p. 195)

This frustration with the pettiness of the business world is reworked in many of her novels, in particular The Day In Shadow, and is understandable when one considers the excitement of Sahgal's childhood where history seemed to unfold before her eyes.

What is interesting here is the form of protest to which Sahgal subscribes. Her dissatisfaction is evident but, unlike her idealism in Prison, never boldly stated. It appears to be curbed into an uneasy, stoic acceptance, and sometimes sectioned off into humorous asides. In some instances her perceptions appear to have changed fundamentally since the first autobiography: her praise for the 'feminine' attire of Indian women in Prison is replaced in Fear by frustration at the limitations of a view that judges women by what they wear rather than what they say (see p. 112). Yet through it all Sahgal holds to the view that her ideals are a sure possibility, and that her experiences and new understanding do not disprove her early dream for India.

Revision of the Concept of the Nation

Sahgal's revised perceptions of Indian women are paralleled by a new portrait of the Indian nation. Unlike her depiction of a unified India in Prison, the India described in Fear is multiple and pluralist. Sahgal is only able to sustain her new portrait by putting her old ideals into new terms. She describes the plurality of the Indian nation as a necessary basis for the Independence ideal:

> Nor could one language, one culture or one religion ever be the formula for India, unless a great deal of value was leavened and lost in the process and the very foundation of India destroyed. (p. 203) [my emphasis]

Plurality and diversity have been reinscribed into the stern terminology of constitutional democracy. The religious, personal, language of her earlier autobiography has been replaced by a formal, textbook phraseology, and the very nature of her ideals taken a public form.

In the process her own position has come to be redefined. Alienated from herself and the society that surrounds her, Sahgal has taken on the language of a public persona. The text ends with the quiet affirmation of a sense of duty that has constantly been called upon in

the text, and describes it as a call to serve the nation. Significantly she describes an affirmation of the old order of privilege in the process:

> The kettle was simmering on the stove for his [the servant's] late cup of tea, and another day had begun. Another Indian day of manifold tasks, great and humble, to be lovingly performed, so that India might live in light and freedom. (p. 24)

A study of the autobiographies reveals a special tension between Sahgal's formal preoccupation and her ideological allegiance that is brought to bear in her fiction. We have seen the nature and origin of her personal ideals and how the development from the personal narrative voice to the public rhetoric found in her fiction is now complete. One feels that for Sahgal the crusade is just beginning.

Notes and References

1. John Pilger, 'Myth-Makers of the Gulf War', The Guardian, 7 January 1991, p. 21.

2. Louis Renza quoted in Robert Elbaz A Study of the Autobiographic Discourse, p. 11.

3. Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Women's Autobiographical Selves' in The Private Self, edited by Shari Benstock, p. 36.

4. See Said on Foucault in Orientalism, p. 94. Also J.B. Thompson, Studies in The Theory of Ideology, p. 7; and Frank Lentricchia, Criticism and Social Change p. 160.

5. Avrom Fleishman, The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf, p. xv.

6. Georg Lukacs, The Historical Novel trans. by H. and S. Mitchell, pp. 41 and 45.

7. Elbaz, p. 11.

8. Stephen Butterfield quoted in Susan Stanford Friedman 'Women's Autobiographical Selves', in The Private Self, see above, p. 43.

9. Eugene Lunn on Lukacs in Marxism and Modernism, p. 78.

10. Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'Female Rhetorics', in The Private Self, see above, p. 181.

11. Katherine Goodman's book Dis/Closures: Women's Autobiographies in Germany Between 1790 and 1914 is particularly illuminating in this respect. Goodman shows how the majority of German women autobiographers 'adopt

... poses ... which are socially acceptable [and] intellectually thinkable' because they have 'little sense of "self"'. See pp. xi and xvi.

12. Friedman, p. 39.

13. Eugene Lunn on Lukacs, see above, p. 78.

14. Ibid., p. 78.

15. Ibid., p. 89.

16. I refer to Rao's Preface again in my chapter on Sahgal's novels.

17. The term is used by Robert Elbaz, p. 3.

18. Elbaz, ibid., see his discussion of self-definition on pp. 10-11.

19. The passage reads: 'I saw him for the first time as a human being and not as the muttering, shuffling gnome, so much a part of my childhood, who along with a small army of other servants, had fed, scolded and pampered me into maturity' (p. 87).

7

THE NOVELS OF NAYANTARA SAHGAL

Development in the Novels

As we have seen, Sahgal's autobiographies provide a cohesive structure from which she can put forward a personal perspective of the past and a vision of the future. They reveal how she constructs a powerful political myth - a myth of national identity-by drawing upon moral and political truths which belong to the specific period of Indian Independence. Yet because these truths are static, they increasingly lose their authority within Sahgal's representation of the Indian political and social present. And as material reality increasingly impinges on Sahgal's values, we see in her novels a corresponding movement from idealism to protest to escapism. Her latest novels, Plans For Departure and Mistaken Identity, are set in the pre-independence past - the only period that sustains the relevance of Sahgal's Independence ideals and shows them as victorious.

Clearly we cannot speak of Sahgal's ideological development without demonstrating the formal development which accompanies it. As Terry Eagleton has argued, 'Forms

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are historically determined by the kind of "content" they have to embody; they are changed, transformed, broken down as that content itself changes.'[1] In Sahgal's oeuvre we see a development from an idealised conception of the political present embodied in a unified narrative structure (in A Time To Be Happy) to an increasing divergence between her moral idealism and her realist impulse which results in a form of Brechtian realism that reaches its culmination in Rich Like Us. In her most recent works we see a revaluation of the seeming securities of the historical past and an affirmation, in Plans For Departure, less of political truths than of the power of the individual imagination.

In the following pages I will chart the complex interplay between history, Sahgal's political idealism, and her narrative structures in five novels: A Time To Be Happy; The Day In Shadow; A Situation In New Delhi; Rich Like Us and Plans For Departure. I will focus on three key areas:

1) The increasing divergence between Sahgal's critical impulse (evident from her second novel onwards) - which draws on some Brechtian techniques such as generic multiplicity, formal fragmentation and spatial structure - and her desire to maintain the authority of a 'Gandhian'

moral framework that she is unable to reconcile with the material reality she depicts. Since true Brechtian realism would force a re-evaluation of her own moral values,[2] Sahgal attempts to deprive such realism of its critical depth. Far from permitting the reader an insight into the mechanisms of power and social change, Sahgal's realism becomes what Hayden White defines as Formism: a '"dispersive mode" in which the depiction of the variety, colour and vividness of the historical field is taken as the central aim'.[3] Sahgal's moral framework , therefore, is not integrated into the fabric of her text: events and character unfold in a fictional world whose moral basis is static, and therefore unable to make sense of a fluid, complex and necessarily contradictory process of historical development.

2) The ideological imperatives that shape her work, in particular the influence of Gandhian ideology, and the construction of national identity. I examine the ideological tension, so evident in her work, between the advocacy of reason and an idealisation of the past, which can be seen as related to the fundamental paradox embodied by Gandhi himself: the man of God who advocated reason and moderation. Furthermore, I suggest that Sahgal's own paradoxical allegiance to both realism and idealism can be traced, at least in part, to Gandhi's doctrine of

satyagraha or 'the way of truth': a doctrine based on both a moral demand for a fair perspective (which Sahgal attempts to fulfil through her 'realist' commitment) and an ideal condition towards which his followers aspire.

3) The representation of women in the novels and the relationship of this with Sahgal's conception of the Indian nation. The women move from being the symbols of traditional India to serving as the conscience of the nation. In many ways the women characters reveal Sahgal's own changing relationship to her country.

In this chapter I will show that Sahgal is primarily a diagnostic writer. All her novels (most of which are set in the period immediately prior to the time of writing) are in active dialogue with India's political present, and are constantly negotiating and renegotiating between history and contemporary reality from a nationalist perspective. Sahgal's attachment to Gandhian ideology means that she makes her political, social and cultural biases clear. But as the distance between past and present widens, so Sahgal's early idealism gives way to protest, disillusion and eventual retreat into the certainties of the past. Therefore whilst her formal relativism and critical evaluation allow her to diagnose and analyse particular social ills, her uncompromising

attachment to pre-Independence Gandhian ideals leaves her incapable of offering a cure.

A Time To Be Happy (1958): Idealist Abstraction

Nayantara Sahgal's first novel was published four years after Prison and Chocolate Cake, and bears some resemblances to it. Like Prison her first novel is both a review and a celebration of the Independence struggle. Yet unlike Prison her novel is dreamy and impressionistic, and presents itself as a modern fairy-tale. This is partly because of a difference in the narrative voice. Whereas in Prison the text was clearly narrated from her personal perspective, Time is presented from the view-point of a middle-aged, wealthy man who has both the time and inclination to reminisce and observe.

The novel is set in the period immediately before and after Independence, and describes the impact of the nationalist struggle on a wide variety of characters - in particular on the lives of two families, the Shivpals and the Sahais, who are both friends of the narrator. The families are very different. The Shivpals are very Westernised whilst the Sahais are traditional Hindus. The movement from the 'artificial' world of the Shivpals in part one to the 'natural' world of the Sahais in part two

mirrors the broader historical movement from the world of British India to independent India.

In the third and final part of the novel we find a tentative resolving of differences. The two families are united in 1947, the year of Independence, through the marriage of Sanad Shivpal (the son of wealthy businessman Govind Narayan) and Kusum Sahai (the daughter of a professor of Indian history). This marriage suffers some early difficulties in the resolving of differences but eventually mutual love and the conscious effort to learn from one another results in a stability that offers hope for the future. It is a central and symbolic event, that together with the novel's celebratory title, makes the text more than just a glimpse of the past; it is also a manifestation of what Fredric Jameson has called 'the immense Utopian appeal of nationalism',[4] presenting as it does the vision of a potentially unified Indian nation.

There is a dream-like quality to the way in which Sahgal's narrator describes the multifarious events and forces which fuel the independence period. Filtered through his consciousness, these forces and events constitute the creative process that moves from apparent chaos towards the realisation of human and cultural potential. What Sahgal portrays is the necessary flux and

instability of a nation in the process of recreating itself in its own image rather than that of its would-be imperial masters. The novel is dense and polyphonic, the representational characters appear to 'float' through a narrative that seems to lack direction, and events, filtered through the mind of an unnamed, dreamy old man, are loosened from their concrete roots, and gain the status of symbol. This symbolism is not overstated. Rather it is evident in the plot, the juxtaposition of episodic, anecdotal flashbacks, the interplay of representational characters and the musings of an elderly man narrating a story that is not his own.[5] 'This is really Sanad's story' (p. 6) we are told at the beginning.

The Reality of Change and The Ideal of Cultural Continuity

The titles of nearly all Sahgal's novels reveal her preoccupation with documentation: they nearly all refer to time and/or place. A Time To Be Happy in fact does much more. It documents in both concrete and emotional terms the way in which the nationalist struggle transformed the lives of a cross-section of society.

The transformation is related retrospectively through a description of life during British India. The novel opens

with a post-Independent observation on the new attitude towards all things British:

> We were walking past the Sharanpur Club one morning when Sanad said he wanted to give up his job with Selkirk and Lowe. There had been so many changes during the months since Independence that his announcement did not surprise me as it might otherwise have done. It seemed a part of the slow tide of change, and his making it as we were passing the Club, symbolic. (p. 3)

What follows is a series of flashbacks focussing in particular on the period of violence in '42. It reveals Sanad's decision about his job only at the very end: he resolves to remain in the company but to continue his journey of self-discovery to find his Indian roots.

Like Markandaya's The Golden Honeycomb, Sahgal's novel presents the impact of imperial rule in different ways.[6] Britishness - in both the form propagated by the British themselves and the somewhat artificial form assumed by a segment of Indian society - is shown to have both comic and tragic results. On the light side the British themselves are presented, in the main, as superficial, unimaginative, class-conscious and overly concerned with maintaining their social etiquette in a country where it has no relevance. This view is shown to comic effect in the depictions of Raghubir, the tabla-playing Indian clerk, who, forced to discard his dhoti-kurta for a suit,

cuts a pathetic figure at the English typewriter (p. 129) and the irascible Englishman Weatherby who during the violence of '42 is determined to keep up appearances by putting on a tie (that is later soiled by the deft throw of a mud-wielding urchin) :

> No rioting hooligans in the streets would find the sahib without a tie today. Heat or no heat, it was a symbol of correct office gear, and today of all days it must be worn to prove that the British attached no importance to the agitators. The Empire had been built on such decisions as this. (p. 111)

But there is darker side to this preoccupation with appearances. The British Raj itself is shown to perpetuate a false, illusory world cut off from the reality of Indian life and political change. Sanad finds the British - and the rich Indians who sustain their system - particularly blind in Calcutta. Attending a lavish party at Sir Ronu Chatterji's he glances out of the window and is appalled to see a small child with a dead baby in her arms 'looking up at the lights. If she was asking for alms, I couldn't hear her because the music was so loud' (p. 100). Sahgal clearly selects the blindness to economic and social inequalities and to human suffering for particular criticism. Where the British blindness to the reality of forthcoming Independence is shown in a comic way, the condemnation of ignorance to more

permanent troubles is strongly conveyed through Sanad's speech:

> 'There was a war on, but nobody even mentioned the subject or any event of it. There were premonitions of famine in Bengal, but no one seemed remotely aware of them. There we were, in the most elegant of dining rooms, eating course after course of excellent food, talking about polo, fishing, and the weather. It was like a never-never land of inanity, deliberately sealed and barred against an intelligent awareness of the real world. ... I went home with a feeling that an immense masquerade was going on in Calcutta, and that if one tore off the masks and finery, all the ugly rotting structure underneath would be revealed.' (p. 104)

Hence the process of alienation for wealthy Westernised Indians such as Sanad is more than just 'a strange feeling to be midway between two worlds, not completely belonging to either' (p. 151). Sanad's exclusion from the all-English Sharanpur Club, which puts him into the same category as the 'general run of Indians', makes him realise that he knows nothing of the nation or the people of whom he is a part:

> He realised he was no different from the all the others when it came to membership in a club. He might wear a better made suit, speak better English, and have a larger income than they, but he was one of them just the same. ... It occurred to him...that his parents had gone to a great deal of trouble and expense moulding him to be a figure that would never have any reality. (p. 125)

His self-conscious quest for an Indian identity forms the central theme of the text, and his arguments for a return to cultural synthesis through understanding Indian culture are repeatedly made:

> Take our clothes, our mannerisms, our speech. Take us. What are we? I'm not saying it's not a good thing to borrow from another culture, but to take it over lock, stock and barrel and become an imitation of it - it's pathetic. ... it's not uniformity I'm objecting to but a mimic uniformity that has nothing whatever to do with our roots. (p. 96)

Sanad's desire for cultural authenticity - an ideal that is exemplified in the second part of the novel by the symbolic representation of the Sahai family - may be seen as emblematic of the broader quest for a truly national identity that followed in the wake of the Independence struggle.

This affirmation of a national identity is not confined to a conceptual level - a contrast to Sahgal's later novels in which it is primarily related through debate and intellectual argument. It is instead extended into concrete action as Sanad tries to learn Hindi, begins to spin, and marries a wife from an orthodox background. At the same time he makes compromises to the British way of life in which his wealthy father, Govind Narayan, has brought him up: he continues to wear Western

dress and work for a British firm. Through Sanad we see the arguments, and active quest, for national identity being resolved through the plot itself. In Time, intellectual argument is integrated with practical action.

The Unstable Narrator

In revealing the artificiality of British India, Sahgal constructs an ostensibly 'authentic' Indian identity which is itself an amalgam of politically expedient values and myths. This mythologising however is not immediately evident. Her consistent use of realist formal devices works to convey the immediacy of situations thereby distancing the ideological message. Time is a novel rich in dialogue and social interplay. It accurately describes, through linguistic variation and the use of national and regional dialects, the idiosyncrasies of individual characters whilst also drawing their social background. The translation of reported speech into direct speech and the paraphrasing of journals (pp. 160 and 254) also help to flesh out her novel in realist terms. I do not think it is an accident that the first section of the novel, describing the artificial world of British India, is sometimes related in terms of rather dated English - e.g. 'our laughter was uproarious', 'replying to my sally ...' (p. 39); 'though we drove through the city in a merry

mood, determined to waken some man of God from his slumber, our mission was not successful' (p. 41) - whereas the middle and later sections of the novel are so fluid and rich in Hindi terminology that a glossary of Hindi terms has been included; the very language of the novel describes the transition from one world to another.

Sahgal's mythmaking project is further disguised by the constant claim to neutrality made by the novel's narrator. It is significant that he remains unnamed throughout the novel, and his sparse biographical details are only used to support the character portraits and histories of those around him. He is shown to be a passive observer who likes to spend his evenings sitting on the lawn where 'I could watch people stroll past and observe their behaviour without being observed' (p. 136). Sahgal pointedly affirms his objectivity: 'I wish I were inclined to be more fanciful', he is shown to reflect at one point, 'It is a quality I lack. If I have had to imagine any of the details in this narrative, I have tried to do so without altering the main facts and only to make it more readable' (p. 110). He claims, in other words, to be not a myth-maker but a documentarist.

And yet the form of the novel has many of the personal, dream-like and inherently subjective qualities

that Raja Rao, another nationalist novelist heavily influenced by Gandhi, has described as a particularly Indian form of writing. It is an ongoing narrative, an 'interminable tale' in Rao's words, where 'episode follows episode' and where pace and direction is dictated by the flow of the story-teller's thoughts.[7] Inevitably this also means that the novel is coloured by the narrator's personal preoccupations and his own conception of the Independence struggle, which is shown to attain the quality of a spectacle (in terms that strikingly recall Sahgal's own views in Prison): 'those of us who were aware of the happenings in India during the pre-Independence decade lived either in the past or in the future. The present had only the kind of dim reality which exists in the theatre before the curtain rises for the next scene of a performance' (p. 182). Between a certain past and an idealised future, the present is shorn of its specificity. Here we find the triumph of idealism over an awareness of what is. An idealism, moreover, that will be seen to constitute both a key characteristic and a major perceptual limitation in all Sahgal's later work.

The narrator's own prejudices are most evident in the debates - a form of dialogue which Sahgal is to focus on later in her writing[8] - that take place on the issues of cultural difference and national identity. Collectively

these discussions define a clear conception of national identity which can be summarised as follows: India is country with an assimilative culture that is deeply rooted in an ancient religious and philosophical tradition; a country where time-honoured custom dominates and where time itself is seen in terms of eternity; where the individual achieves heroism through a stoic acceptance of his/her role in life and the fulfilment of it (see pp. 163-68). The end of the novel heralds a new era, the era of a return to rural tradition and cottage industry, and a revival of Indian culture. It is, we are told, now the age of the common man (p. 246). All these ideals are most concretely expressed in Sahgal's depiction of women who as in Markandaya's novels are shown as the touchstones of tradition.

Women as the Custodians of Indian Culture and the Natural World

The women characters in the novel are as plentiful as their male counterparts but considerably less diverse. They are predominantly Indian and offer a philosophical understanding of events that serves as a foil for, and a commentary on, the superficial money-orientated concerns of the men. There are four principal women characters in the novel. Kusum Sahai (Sanad's future wife), Savitri

(Kusum's mother), Maya (the quiet social-worker wife of a snobbish Westernised Indian businessman)[9] and Lalita (the sexually-provocative and morally-dualistic wife of Sir Ronu Chatterji). They are all presented as part of a natural essence which is shown to emanate from and embody something fundamentally 'Indian'.

Kusum and Savitri are the most elaborately drawn women characters and are also the prototypes of two other women characters, Veena and Prabha. We are introduced to Kusum when Sanad first meets her after an incident of mob student-violence during which Raghubir, the Indian clerk, has been found to be a casualty. She speaks Hindi, a language Sanad does not know, and greets him with the traditional namaskar. The narrator then gives us the social and historical background to Kusum's childhood from a perspective which he describes as that of 'a casual observer' but which is clearly symbolic - especially so given that Kusum's name means 'blossom':

> The children were neither too well cared for nor too wild. There was about them the same gypsy abandon that characterised their garden. Compared with the carefully clipped hedges and beautiful flower-beds of Govind Narayan's garden with its exquisite, expensive blooms imported from Europe, the Sahai's was a tangle of colour that had sprung up in obedience to no particular design. (pp. 169-70)

We are then introduced to Savitri, her mother, a warm, serene, maternal woman who in being in touch with nature is also in close communication with her culture:

> There was always plenty to eat at the Sahai's, but one left the table feeling light, a thing that was not possible at Govind Narayan's. Savitri was a firm believer in the fruits and vegetables of the season, in 'heating' foods during cold weather and 'cooling' foods during the hot weather. (p. 176)

Her sage and stoic acceptance of her favourite son's death is an important event in the novel. Her son, a poet and dreamer, who is shown to be entranced by an ideal vision of his country (pp.179-80), is killed when he refuses to comply to the demands of some bullying British soldiers.

His death can be seen as the necessary death of an uncompromising idealist, whilst Savitri, who articulates the faith in an untarnished Indian identity, remains as the custodian of good sense and understanding. In a speech made before her son's death she translates the truth of her own isolation as a woman into broad cultural and historical terms:

> 'I do not isolate myself. It is the ones who rule us who isolate themselves, who have never tried to understand. ... They have taken our land ... But they have not penetrated the inner sanctum, the real temple that is India. In that they have no interest for it does not profit them. The realm of the spirit continues inviolate, soaring above the crushed hopes and the unborn dreams. That still belongs to Bharat

> Mata alone, and no one can deprive her of it. (p. 188)

This summarises a tenet of faith, presented rather than argued, that pervades Sahgal's novel - a faith in a unified and tolerant Indian nation that synthesises nature and culture. This is an idealistic view which comes under increasing interrogation in the later novels. Indeed, by the time of Sahgal's fourth novel, The Day In Shadow, the central female character gives an altogether more circumspect view of Indian tradition and customs.

The Day In Shadow (1971): Divorce and Cultural Synthesis

The Day In Shadow marks an important stage in Sahgal's development as a writer. Although it is similar to both her second and third novels in that it polarises key characters, one of whom has the potential to be an ideal leader (This Time of Morning and Storm in Chandigarh), and describes a resolution of political conflict (Storm in Chandigarh), the fourth novel is more tightly structured than its predecessors because the intellectual debate is shown to emerge from a clearly identified emotional experience. Sahgal's concern with cultural values and national goals is related through both the interrogation and emotional understanding of a specific cultural phenomenon: the financially-crippling divorce settlement dictated by Som, a wealthy businessman to his wife Simrit. Formal divorce, which is pursued by only one half of one per cent of the Indian population,[10] is shown to be a modern phenomenon that can be used to reflect, rather than revise, some of the injustices that Hindu tradition has meted out to women. The Consent Terms themselves are not the focus of the novel. Rather, translated into broader social terms, they form the nucleus of an emotionally-founded intellectual debate which concludes that cultural synthesis is drawn, not from the unity of nature and

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culture as in A Time To Be Happy, but from a moral and religious code.

Sahgal herself has emphasised the centrality of Simrit's emotional crisis to the work. In interviews she has stressed what for her appears to be the radical nature of Simrit's hasty, impulsive departure from her marital home as she takes herself and her four children into an uncertain future.[11] Yet within the narrative itself this significant event is shown less as the product of Simrit's 'radical' and deliberate rejection of oppression than as the result of circumstances over which she has little control. The text focusses on the conditions leading up to, and the consequences following, Simrit's departure - eliding questions of individual moral choice which properly belong to a consciously radical action. Simrit's departure is an act of necessity, not of choice - an inevitability since her husband had made it impossible for her to remain in the house in the first place. The emotional roots of Sahgal's polemic, though clearly drawn, are subsumed within and rationalised into a wider concern with the conditionality of actions, their consequences on the individual, and the way this reflects on society as a whole.

As in her previous work Sahgal tries to remain committed both to a realist form and to an advocacy of nationalist ideals. This results in a divided narrative. Sahgal refuses to compromise either on the level of action (the description of a specific social milieu and the relating of events in the novel) or on the level of ethical advocacy (the Gandhian values she subscribes to). This produces a disjunction between Sahgal's advocacy of a moral and ethical 'guide to life' which effectively transcends social reality to find meaning and harmony on a metaphysical level, and her realist project which presents Indian social, sexual and cultural conflict in all its seemingly unresolveable complexity. Once again, idealism sits in uneasy and contradictory relationship with an insistent realist impulse.

But this relationship is not an equal one: Sahgal clearly attempts to privilege her idealist vision. Simrit's passivity, her stoic conformity with the Gandhian ideal of non-violence which she shares with all Sahgal's earlier heroines, confirms her status as a victim of other people's decisions. Yet Sahgal tries to disguise this by presenting, at some length, an optimistic, uplifting close to the novel. She replaces the bold, uncompromising and angry terminology with which she opens the novel with metaphysical philosophising and an argument for an

optimistic perspective. This however is subverted by the very substance of the closing chapters the relation of which is an integral part of her realist enterprise. Almost despite itself, The Day In Shadow becomes a revealing feminist text, demonstrating the immutable quality of Indian society, and the crippling effect that the ingrained and 'naturalised' ideal of Hindu womanhood has on individuals like Simrit. This effect, moreover, is revealed not through the articulately reasoned and emphatic words of the social spokesmen and thinkers - notably Raj and Ram Krishan - but through the actions, or rather non-actions, of Simrit herself.

One of the consequences of Sahgal's oscillation between the material and the metaphysical dimensions is a constant shift within the text between multiple registers of meaning: we see a movement from the material results of divorce, to an exploration of its psychological impact on Simrit, to a thesis for a kind of 'marriage' between the Christian and Hindu outlooks, to, finally, a concept of Indian cultural unity that is translated into overtly religious terms. These shifting realms of meaning, and the ways in which they either reinforce or contradict each other, will become clearer through a more detailed study of three of the novel's key areas of interest: first the material and moral aspects of divorce in modern India;

secondly the philosophical debate on a cultural ideal; and thirdly the use of debate itself as a means and a metaphor for the form of her fiction. In the process of studying them in these three categories, I reveal how Sahgal uses the fluid boundaries between fiction and argument to substantiate an optimistic view of cultural renewal that is refuted by the action and narrative development in her fiction.

Divorce and Death; the Material Basis of a Moral Outlook

Sahgal opens the novel with a description of an élite party that is attended among others by Simrit, a recently-divorced woman who is a freelance journalist. She feels herself to be on the periphery of 'the husband-centred' (p. 2) gathering where a woman's status is determined by where she lives and to whom she is married. She has been emotionally transformed by her 'quick' divorce: 'it took two years actually; but that was phenomenally quick when it took a year to get a Birla car... and all eternity, according to Som, to get a licence to manufacture something. You'd think there would be some sense of proportion about it and that a break-up of a family would be a little harder to accomplish' (pp. 4-5) . Yet the effects of divorce are shown to reach far beyond the loss of social identity and the suffering of

personal pain: these are just two elements of a loss of self and even of life.

This extreme correlation is adumbrated in Simrit's description of a past incident: she recalls her shock at discovering that her former husband's friend, Lalli, had shot his wife when he found her in bed with another man. The killing was never brought to justice because the incident took place during the chaotic and violent time of Partition, and is condoned by Som who argues that 'Either a woman wants you or she doesn't. It's pretty clear this one didn't want him' (p. 28). (Later in the novel Simrit is shown to draw a direct comparison between Lalli's treatment of his wife and Som's treatment of her. (p. 138)) The theme of wife-murder is then taken up by Sahgal, and paralleled with Simrit's divorce settlement. However, it is at first so described not by Simrit herself but by her friend Raj, who says she is 'trapped and maimed', subject to 'butchery' (p. 39):

> 'This document you so blithely signed without reading or understanding it...has let you in for slow butchery for as long as you live. Even a life sentence ends after fourteen years. Yours is till you die.' ...
>
> The crowning irony was it s title - the Consent Terms. Consent! Suttees, he supposed had given their consent too, after a fashion, as they climbed their husbands' funeral pyres. (p. 40)

The Consent Terms, we are told, mean that Som, a very wealthy businessman, has transferred a huge financial burden onto his wife by putting aside a large sum of money for his son in Simrit's name. She is thus liable to pay taxes that 'cripple any effort she might try to make at supporting herself or saving for her future' (p. 167) until the boy comes of age. These financial details provide the basis for a protracted debate on the treatment of women in India; the 'naturalised' and static presentation of women found in A Time To Be Happy gives way to a conception of women as products of a contingent social and political reality. Sahgal's moral argument emerges not from abstractions but from a material understanding of oppression. Life, in the novel, is not restricted to the spiritual dimension; it is also equated with the very means of livelihood.

By drawing an analogy between Simrit's experience of divorce and sati Sahgal succeeds in conveying both the brutality and the social and legal implications of Simrit's predicament. The comparison permits Sahgal to scrutinise traditional Hindu customs on the one hand, and on the other the modern drive to materialism and so-called progress - each from the perspective of someone deeply concerned with the direction India is taking. Simrit's divorce represents a break with the past - she feels she

has 'offended against something old and - ordained' (p. 137) - that becomes the subject of the broad philosophical debate I study in the next section. For the moment it is useful to see the extent to which Sahgal develops the parallel between the violence of the legal treatment of women and the emerging violence in society.

Violence and the misuse of tradition underwrite events in the novel. They are substantiated by the subtext, which focusses on the popularity and the rise to power of Sumer Singh, a lazy, arrogant and corrupt politician (very like the egotistical and vain Kalyan in This Time Of Morning) who wants closer political and economic ties with the Soviet Union (thus marking a dramatic break away from the policy of non-alignment promoted by India's first prime minister).

Sumer Singh is, like Som, one of a breed of 'ruthless' men (p. 222). Like Som he uses traditional forms to serve his own ends by pandering to his astute but loving father in order to benefit from 'the ancient law of inheritance' (p. 134). Correspondingly, Som who is the very opposite of the ideals that Sahgal describes in her autobiographies - an insensitive, materialistic, and uncommunicative man, (who also is shown to begrudge Partition (p. 24), and prefer the company of men (pp.26 and 84)) - earns a living

through trading in arms. Sumer Singh's increasing political power and Som's growing material influence are both examples of 'isolated forcefulness, isolated currents of energy undirected by vision or compassion' (p. 44) and convey the growing egotism that is evident in society. Both men are shown to treat women callously so that the movement from concern with Simrit's personal predicament to the treatment of women in society as whole is fully integrated into a general moral perspective. Sahgal extrapolates from her drama an argument on the need for moral and, by extension, cultural renewal. As in her later novel, Rich Like Us, she uses the condition of women as a central means of conveying a broader social malaise and as a platform for voicing her own political truths.

Attack on Hindu Tradition: The Philosophical Debate

In The Day In Shadow Sahgal describes the need for reform within the Hindu tradition. The 'day' of her title is synonymous with the dawn of India's liberation through Independence as described by the Christian Raj: 'Freedom and daybreak. Freedom carrying the cross of Partition. But freedom. Daybreak then, ... but where are we heading now?' (p. 150). It is important that, although the novel engages heavily with seemingly open debates, Sahgal chooses Raj, a Christian and therefore a member of a

minority, as her central spokesman. He is shown to question the fundamental aspects of Hindu tradition, attacking in particular its treatment of women and girls, and its upholding of the caste system.

His attack is primarily focussed on the moral outlook that these customs engender and the debilitating effect they have on society as a whole. He is angered by Hindu fatalism, passivity and the 'virtue of renunciation' (p. 171) which Simrit embodies; he condemns the 'assimilative', unchanging, quality of Hindu culture that absorbs all contradictions so that 'nothing is either a danger or a challenge' (p. 19); and he feels frustrated by the way it limits individual understanding by translating it into accepted forms of thought and expression: 'Did Hindus have any feelings that were personal and private, unconnected with institutions like the family, caste, and the beaten track of these past 2,000 years and more?' (p. 103). What Raj wants is to something new, vital, and 'the positive desire for something positive' (p. 102).

This desire gains expression and fulfilment through the thoughts and written conclusions of Ram Krishan, a Hindu writer, who is described as a prophetic figure (pp. 165 and 198). Like Raj he is a character who has absorbed himself in his thoughts and work after having lost the

woman he loved. His life-long struggle has been a search for spiritual synthesis - epitomised by his unresolved debate with Raj's long-dead Christian father - that will serve as the basis for cultural renewal and 'for action, not merely a scripture and a ritual' (p. 196). Ram Krishan arranges his thoughts on the desirability of a synthesis between the two great religions, Hinduism and Christianity, in 'dialogue form' for the New Year issue of his magazine. Christianity, he argues is an active, reformist, 'forward-looking, progressive' religion (p. 200) whereas Hinduism is passive, contemplative and concerned with adapting to what is. His conclusion is couched in metaphysical terms. 'There is no real conflict between the Christian and the Hindu', Ram Krishan deduces because:

> The Christian works for greater good in the universe, the Hindu for a more complete view of the universe. For both God is the source of value and he is all good. The difference between them is there but it is not final. ... Good and evil may be separate channels...but so were parallel lines. ... they met in infinity. (p. 202)

This is clearly a notion of spiritual synthesis that Sahgal endorses, and which finds metaphorical resonance in the forthcoming marriage between Simrit and Raj. Yet it becomes clear from a close reading of the text that this synthesis does not in fact provide a 'basis for action' as described by Ram Krishan. Rather, it constitutes a

philosophical contortion that serves only to put Ram Krishan's mind at rest, and does little to resolve Simrit's powerlessness. What's more, it is reached by the very means condemned by Raj earlier; namely the use of an 'assimilative' perspective that effaces contradictions through abstraction.

The resolutions of the central emotional and dramatic conflict are similarly incomplete. Simrit's efforts to employ a Gandhian approach to her legal 'war' (p. 178) by refusing to 'bend the knee', seem to have little relevance as her life continues to be controlled by external events and other people - her financial circumstances change as the value of the shares on which she pays tax begin to drop, her family is split up as her son chooses to live instead with her former husband, and Raj decides, without consulting her, that they should marry and makes it impossible for her to object by announcing their engagement in public. Both the first and last chapters open in the same setting - a party for the élite at the Intercontinental - reinforcing the sense that the social framework is immutable after all; a view supported by the fact that both Som and Sumer Singh are shown as victors who achieve their objectives.

Debate as a Means and as a Metaphor

Throughout the novel debates are used as a means of voicing conflicting viewpoints. They give the novel an open-ended discursive quality, making it into a kind of literary forum for an exploration of personal, political and historical values. The multiple contending voices constitute, on a theoretical level, an aspect of what Bakhtin has called heteroglossia - 'an era's many and contending languages'. According to Bakhtin, the essence of the novel itself is that 'discourse becomes the subject of discourse': the dominant authorial voice is displaced by an unresolved and inherently contradictory play of meaning.[12] This is peculiarly appropriate to the era of change which forms the background to Sahgal's text. As Ken Hirschkop has pointed out: 'When previously separated and independent social groups are thrown together by the sudden onset of capitalism and its urbanising effects, the result is that coexistence of distinct languages which seems to define heteroglossia'.[13] Such an exploration of meaning through dialogue and debate forms both the context and the content of Sahgal's narrative. Debate itself, or 'dialogue' as it is called in the novel, becomes itself the subject of discussion.

In her autobiography From Fear Set Free Sahgal describes how Nehru tells her that the two most important things for a successful marriage are 'never to hurt...[one] another deliberately' and 'always to leave the way open to talk ... It is true of people and nations' (p. 237). Both Simrit and Raj are shown to attach importance to the value of dialogue. Indeed the breakdown of Simrit's marriage to Som is shown to be directly attributable to the lack of intellectual partnership and verbal communication with Som: it was a marriage where 'her usefulness to him had never extended to areas of the mind' (p. 77).

Debate and dialogue are shown to be forms of communication essential to a fair and balanced perspective, and to mutual understanding. They form part of Sahgal's attempt to promote the value of 'objectivity'. Raj is the principal spokesman in this respect. He represents the realm of the intellect (pp. 159 -60) so long denied to Simrit, and her relationship with him is shown to develop through shared beliefs and ideological perspectives. He in turn embarks on 'a way of loving - objectively of course' (p. 40) by helping Simrit with her tax problem, and later voices anger at Som's treatment of her by saying '"It's the injustice of the thing ... It sort of puts one into a cold fury. An objective fury "'

(p. 167). Such remarks seem to draw attention to the distance he puts between himself and his feelings. Yet Sahgal does not relate them in ironic terms. Dialogue becomes interchangeable for Raj with a moral perspective which, as I will show shortly, is transposed by Sahgal into visionary terms.

Raj, a moderate, thinking man, who is a member of the Independent party, sees the need for social and political reform that draws the best from Indian cultural tradition. Although a Christian who is highly critical of the stultifying nature of Hindu thought and action, he is able to see value in Hinduism too. Recalling his Christian father, Raj remembers:

> Most of his reserves had been used up in the formidable fight against tradition. But Raj, even as a child , had not been able to identify himself completely with his father's revolt. He had been too conscious of the older heritage around them, the Hindu mainstream of the country's life. It intrigued and fascinated him, this environment to which his blood belonged ... (p. 104)

Raj's sympathy for Hinduism notwithstanding, it becomes clear that Sahgal intends us to see in Christianity a radical and important alternative to the moral limitations of the Hindu mainstream. Yet its power is as yet only potential: 'Christianity had become Indian, its schools and colleges and hospitals firmly part of the community'

(p. 104) - but its moral imperatives have yet to permeate far enough into Indian society to have any effective social and political impact.

For this reason, Raj's Christian ideals - in particular his wish to see the Indian masses extract their destiny from the deterministic clutches of 'fate' and to exercise their free will to change society at large - are translated into visionary terms:

> He had to stop a minute when he stepped outside. It was cold and brilliantly clear, the vast concourse of stars alone a great source of light. A world revealed and bathed in the light of stars.The pure power and expanse of it spelled vision and opportunity. The world is on the threshold of immense changes, he thought. We've got to measure up to them, to be free-willed and creative, not the playthings of chance. We've got to take matters into our own hands. The tragedy of his own people seemed to lie in the fact that they did not. If the inert mass of them did not wake up to the fact that they were their own masters, the brutal and single-minded among them would. (p. 43)

Raj clearly shares with Ram Krishan the unity of thought and feeling that Sahgal sees as integral to the proper conduct of political and social life. Although from different and in many ways antithetical religious backgrounds, Raj and Ram Krishan have a common moral outlook. This is the moral synthesis, the bridging of religious conflict, that for both Raj and Ram Krishan holds out the greatest hope for India's future. To Ram

Krishan, such a synthesis answers his lifetime quest for a moral answer to the ills that beset his country. Yet, in describing Ram Krishan's view of an ostensibly 'un-mystical' and presumably politically potent moral perspective, Sahgal resorts to descriptive terms that belong not to the practical world of politics, but to the abstract realms of metaphysics:

> He was as sure now of his answer, tranquil and inviolable, as he was of the messages of colour and form his brain received. The answer was no mystic's vision but a picture seen in perspective. It had always been there, but now it was like a city emerged form a misty shroud, the lines of its buildings clean, hard and geometrical, its pillars and arches in classical juxtaposition. (p. 203)

This metaphysical resolution of actual social and political conflicts permits Sahgal to reinscribe Simrit's suffering as a kind of purgatory phase that cleanses and renews her - but only on a spiritual level. Sahgal's powerful description of social, sexual and political suffering in the early part of the novel gives way to a visionary mode that offers solutions only in abstract, romantic terms. How the metaphysical and the practical might be integrated into a coherent political programme forms the central theme of Sahgal's next novel, A Situation in New Delhi.

A Situation in New Delhi (1977): Romanticising History

In her fifth novel Sahgal conveys the breadth and depth of an historical period through the effective use of religious language and metaphor. The novel covers a few months in the lives of a small 'charmed circle' of friends who reunite after the death of their great friend and leader, Shivraj. The principal figures are Devi, Shivraj's devoted sister who is the Education Minister, Usman Ali, the Muslim Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University and Michael Calvert, an English historian. Sahgal subsumes their interlocking stories and perspectives into a broad moral and religious framework that powerfully works to recreate not merely the broad, conflicting social tapestry as described in The Day In Shadow or a vision of an ideal and harmonious nation as described in A Time To Be Happy but a fusion of these: the enactment of a myth of a changing present.

This is done by the use of a technique evident in her earlier work - the overlapping of individual perspectives. But whereas in her earlier work there was a discernible gap, a disjunction, between these and both the narratorial outlook and the plot, in Situation they are fully integrated with the authorial view and the unfolding of

action. This is a result of Sahgal having subsumed the realist impulse of her text into a romantic framework or 'archetypal form', to use Hayden White's term.[14] It describes a change in emphasis rather than a change in direction. In A Time To Be Happy Sahgal had emphasised temporal continuity and in This Time of Morning, and Storm in Chandigarh she used an open-ended chronicle form to describe temporal stasis - a clearly discernible division, studied earlier, between a realist impulse in the description of society and the idealist advocacy of the need for structural change in The Day in Shadow. The division is resolved in A Situation in New Delhi.

The novel combines (to use the terms of Hayden White) modes of emplotment, argument and ideological implication in a 'structurally homologous' way.[15] It combines a 'Romantic' mode of emplotment, a 'Formist' mode of argument and an 'Anarchist' mode of ideological implication which White argues have 'elective affinities'. I will analyse the development in Sahgal's form and ideas by analysing these modes in three contexts: first, aspects of Sahgal's realism which includes elements of the Formist mode; secondly, her advocacy of non-violence and the Anarchist mode of ideological implication; and finally the Romantic mode of emplotment that frames both the form and ideas in the novel. In the process I show how in A

Situation in New Delhi Sahgal has reached a balance in her treatment of her material.

Aspects of Realism

In Situation Sahgal develops her realist techniques in several different ways. First she portrays the lives and individual perspectives of a much wider cross-section of society than before. Servants, who had either been written out of her novels (as in A Time To Be Happy) or been reduced to a 'moth'-like insignificance (as in The Day In Shadow, p. 86), now feature prominently. Ram Murti, Devi's obsequious chief personal assistant who addresses household objects rather than look Devi in the eye, Ajaib Singh, her militaristic chauffeur who insists on calling her Sir, 'a recognition of equality from him' (p. 24), and Kirti, her 'slave-driving' cook who 'made it impossible for Devi to keep another full-time servant' (p. 35) are an integral part of the novel adding depth and breadth to the portrayal of Devi's ministerial life. Their loyalty, efficiency and long association with her result in a bond that highlights the interdependency between servant and mistress.

This social interaction is furthered by the juxtaposition and shifts in perspectives between people

from a wide variety of backgrounds. The novel, like most of Sahgal's work, is made up of multiple stories that provide a rich social and historical tapestry. However in Situation Sahgal succeeds in developing these stories and juxtaposing them so that we are left not with the construction of a historical myth (as in A Time To Be Happy) or an open-ended or divided text (as in her other early work) but with the argument - revealed rather than described - for the structural transformation of society.

A key example of argument through structural placement can be found in the juxtaposition of the story of Madhu, a university student from a poor background who has been raped during the upsurge of student violence, and the story of Pinky, a spoilt girl who has been removed from college as she awaits her marriage to a wealthy, lazy and unexceptionable young man. Sahgal skilfully succeeds in forcing upon the reader's attention the paucity of choices available for young women by drawing both the differences and the similarities in their respective positions. Madhu's story is linked with Pinky's early in the novel when Devi on returning from a visit to the rape victim's home asks her son to go to Pinky's engagement party. His blunt response is that Pinky's marriage is 'just organised rape' (p. 25). As a result of her rape Madhu is seen as an object of shame and pity for whom the only option is

marriage - even though this is completely against her will. Devi, to whom she turns, is moved to observe that 'parents could be persuaded to delay almost anything except a girl's marriage. There was a tribal fanaticism about girl-disposal' (p. 95).

The tragedy of Madhu's story and the comic elements of Pinky's situation are linked into an organic framework not merely through dramatic juxtaposition or intellectual analogies but by the very language of the text which uses religious - and predominantly Christian - metaphor throughout.

Sahgal's flexibility in handling both language and material is evident throughout the text, and takes on a feminist perspective when dealing with the theme of marriage. 'A son- in-law was sacrosanct. God took second place' (p. 90), Devi is shown to reflect. Later Sahgal recreates the atmosphere of excitement that surrounds Pinky's forthcoming wedding by giving us an insight into the outlook of privileged and marriageable girls in a manner reminiscent of that of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, whilst using religious terminology that is in keeping with the context of her material - unlike the forced analogies (for example between a divorce settlement and sati) in her earlier work:[16]

> Lucky Pinky, Tazi and Reba kept repeating, soon she'd be living her own life, away from prying supervision: no you can't smoke, it doesn't look nice to drink...of course you can't pose for an ad., are you out of your mind, no I don't mind neither does Daddy but your grandmother would be very distressed or Daddy's third cousin twice removed with one foot in the grave would die of a heart attack if he heard of it ... Soon she would be elevated to wife status and she could do as she pleased. Arvind had a flat in Bombay and his million relations, thank every saint, lived hundreds of miles away in some god-for-saken town of Uttar Pradesh. (p. 148)

The use of religious terminology and the blending of one perspective with another is turned to ironic effect in the description of Madhu's arranged marriage: 'But Madhu was waiting for another sort of deliverance. Prayers were answered, the soiled made clean by fasting and penance. God in his mercy appeared to those in need. Her brother frowned at her from the doorway' (p. 61). This is carried over into the description of her suicide by setting fire to herself. In complete contrast to Anita Desai's description of the horrors of a similar ritual in Voices In The City, this suicide, described in a precise, poised manner, is historically and religiously placed. Religion here becomes a subject rather than a metaphor:

> Madhu sighed deeply and lit the sticks. She had nothing to be afraid of because she knew from reading about witch-burning in the European Middle Ages that often the smoke smothered the witch and choked her unconscious, so that she did not feel her death by fire. She bent, inhaling deeply, exaltation possessing her as she invited the bitter smoke into

> her lungs and let the fire reach up and catch her clothes and hair. (p. 157)

This all-encompassing religious framework gives the novel a formal and thematic unity and is part of the romantic archetype of historical narrative I study later. The realist imperatives of Sahgal's narrative are subsumed within this archetypal form.

Formism in the Historical Novel

The shifts in perspective - from Michael Calvert's opening reflections at his English home to Devi's thoughts and lifestyle in New Delhi; from Usman Ali's thoughts on the nature of student violence to the hopes of Rishad, Devi's rebel son - all form part of the Formist mode of explanation : a 'dispersive' mode in which the 'depiction of the variety, colour, and vividness of the historical field' is taken as the writer's main aim.[17] Through it Sahgal is able to develop the vibrant discursive mode that is so characteristic of her fiction. Yet this is not all. White expands his definition further: 'To be sure, a Formist historian may be inclined to make generalisations about the nature of the historical process as a whole, as in Carlyle's characterisation of it as "the essence of innumerable biographies." But in Formist conceptions of historical explanation, the uniqueness of the different

agents, agencies, and acts which make up the "events" to be explained is central to one's inquiries'.[18]

This 'identification of the unique characteristics of objects inhabiting the historical field' [19] and corresponding attraction to abstractions is readily identifiable in Sahgal's novel. The reflections of Michael, Devi and Usman when taken together form a coherent whole through their sympathetic political attitudes: they are all shown to admire their former leader to the point of adoration. This leads them to make generalisations about the political climate, seeing it in terms of principal individuals and institutions. Take for example the biographer Michael's abstracting view of Shivraj that 'this was a unique human being, a kind we rarely, if ever see in politics. ... He was just - himself - and that was what he presented to the public' (p. 8). His view that it is the individual with insight who is responsible for key events in history is very much the view Sahgal endorsed in her autobiographies. The novel describes the need for a leader in romantic terms: Usman says, 'But we're nostalgic for kings, or charismatic leaders, or some shining example that stands out from the millions, republic though we might be' (p. 22). The ideal leader, the novel proposes is Shivraj (who resembles Nehru in that he is a moderate, comes from a 'much-vaunted

ancestry' and governs the country for a decade) who embodies a moral and ideological 'essence' not unlike the terms used by Carlyle:

> Shivraj had the gift of putting things in perspective, and since his death Usman had become convinced that this was leadership's main task. ... To assemble the broken fragments and light up their possibilities. To tell the cripple , Take up thy bed and walk. To resurrect the dead. Leadership did not join the fervent, scream with the mob. Leadership led. ... The world had gone too far ... It would have to desert the mob and come back soon to the individual. ... He felt a peculiar grief at the memory of the man, not at his death, untimely though it had been, but at the passing with him of some vital human essence. (p. 28)

Here Shivraj's ability to see things 'in perspective' or objectively is translated first into mystical terminology and then collapsed into ethereal abstraction. Shivraj remains, like Som in The Day In Shadow, a presence notable for his absence; an ideological cluster rather than a human being.

The Ideal of Non-Violence and The 'Anarchist Mode'

In an interview Sahgal has said that the idea for this novel came from an interest in the Naxalites - a North Indian communist movement committed to agrarian revolution. She has also stated that she wrote the scene in which Rishad destroys the home of a university

colleague as part of a policy of systematic violence first.[20] Rishad's story is full of ironies. Through it Sahgal skilfully conveys the ineffectiveness of violence to combat social ills while exploring the allure that the use of violence has for the new generation of Indians to whom non-violence is just a pre-nationalist ideal.

This is not to say that Sahgal has no sympathy for the communist movement Rishad represents. On the contrary, the novel presents Rishad's aims as laudable; it is the means through which he hopes to achieve them that Sahgal presents as futile. She does this through the skilful interplay of dramatic and conceptual ironies. Rishad, Devi's son and therefore a member of a privileged sector of society, is also a member of an underground movement that works through a policy of systematic destruction of the homes of the upper-middle classes with a view to rebuilding society. On one of his assignments he begins the methodical destruction of a home he himself selected in a good area. He is interrupted when a girl enters the room and, before he can strike her down, she offers to help him tear the place apart. It is her home and not as luxurious as Rishad had expected and, we learn later, that amid all the destruction she tears not only her own clothes but those of her dead mother. She wants to join the movement and agrees to meet Rishad, symbolically, in a

cemetery where she throws down (her notes on) 'Ancient India' in her flurry of enthusiasm. Her question '"When will we do your house? "' (p. 63) brings out the hypocrisy of Rishad's activities. It had never occurred to him to carry his policy of systematic destruction into his own home. His encounter with this girl and his own questions lead him to realise that change begins with individual commitment, that 'revolutions begin with oneself' (p. 146).

Rishad claims he is not a Naxalite but his ideals and principles are comparable to theirs. He endorses a 'cult of violence' which 'had to be clean, cold and disciplined, unaided by motive, by drugs or mental aberration' and which 'through the systematic creation of panic' seeks to create a 'new social order ... Not Utopia. Just food in the stomach and a decent wage. Utopia for the poor and the downtrodden. An Indian Utopia' (p. 58). His ideals are those of an Anarchist in Hayden White's terms, demanding the structural transformation of society and the founding of society on new bases.[21]

It is a movement, Rishad points out, which has 'no room for philosophy' (p. 66) and, perhaps, because of this, the novel suggests, has no 'revolutionary centre' (p. 104) - its leaders dying, its followers scattered. It

lacks the vision and imagination that Sahgal so values. Rishad finds that despite all his aims he is still unable to bridge the gap between himself and the mass in whose name he commits acts of violence; the quarry workers whom he has worked with for several months and hoped to get to know, remain separate from him 'a curtain' coming down between them after every meeting:

> He was on the one side of the curtain, going home, going toward a future. They were on the other side, rooted in their time-stopped existence. They had the immovability of the quarry,the massive inertness of the poundage and tonnage of rock they mined and broke and lifted in monotonous headloads over monotonous hours to fill each truck that carted them to Delhi for construction. They had that stone-anciency. Rishad's group worked with the casteless, the Untouchables. The newspapers called them the 'underprivileged', 'the weaker section'. To Rishad they were scarcely human. They lived from day to day, from hand to mouth, not with the vagabond carelessness of gypsies, but of people with nowhere to go. The outskirts of Delhi or the fringe of society or the edge of history, it was all the same thing. They were people who hadn't known they were people until Rishad and his group under Naren's direction had started teaching them they were ... [that] The law provided redress. How difficult just to teach them they were human. (pp. 97-98)

This emphasis on the 'human' element is part of the Anarchist mode described by White in the following way: 'Anarchists... believe in the necessity of structural transformations...in the interest of abolishing "society" and substituting for it a "community" of individuals held together by a shared sense of their common "humanity"'.[22]

Rishad's views the novel suggests are fundamentally right; it is the means through which he seeks to promote those views that the novel shows as wrong.

Sahgal's endorsement of an Anarchist mode of ideological implication is evident throughout the novel. Anarchism, in White's terms, does not necessarily imply the use of violence. It is a set of ideals and values rather than a method. This allows Sahgal to support its inherent idealism whilst dissociating herself from the violence which the Naxalites, for example, commit in its name. The generalisations of the historical process are founded on a humanist grounding that is articulated time and again by different characters; for example, Devi: 'the process is not the State or anonymous brotherhood, it's our love for our children, and through them all others' (p. 25). Yet there is a further side to the Anarchist view that is also evident in Sahgal's novel; an idealism that results from a 'socially transcendent' temporal dislocation. As White has put it, Anarchists not only 'envision the possibility of cataclysmic transformations', they

> are inclined to idealize a remote past of natural human innocence from which men have fallen into the corrupt "social" state in which they currently find themselves. They in turn project this utopia onto what is effectively a non-temporal plane, viewing it as a possibility of human achievement at any time, if only men would sieze control of their essential

> humanity, either by an act of will or by an act of consciousness.[23]

This sense of anticipation was evident in Sahgal's biographies as she, a spectator of the nationalist struggle, described the atmosphere as that of someone waiting for the drama to begin. It has been carried over into the novels and explains her presentation of each new moment of history as containing within it the seeds of possibility for real change. In her previous three novels this led to a disjunction between her presentation of the present and her hopes for the future. In Situation she has romanticised the present by drawing on a period of the past (Nehru died over a decade before the novel was published).

The Romantic Archetype

A Situation in New Delhi is primarily a love story. It describes the love of three characters for the political ideals represented by Shivraj. This has a dramatic enactment in the novel: Devi (whose name means goddess) is both a lover to Michael and Usman.

The use of the language of magic in the description of historical drama, so much a feature of Sahgal's first autobiography, shows that Sahgal is reaffirming an

idealised conception of history in Situation. The magical terminology and references to spells, witchcraft, rituals and predestination are incorporated into a religious framework that shows the unfolding of key scenes in ancient religious and historical sites and the presentation of Shivraj as a leader who had a 'mystical attachment to the land' (p. 53). It is part of the language of the text which describes a French restaurant in London as a 'temple' with its 'offerings' and 'reverent service' (p. 55) and shows an Indian girl at a Delhi party sip a drink 'with the air of a priestess performing a mysterious rite' (p. 141).

Yet it is not abstract mysticism but a concrete and consistent christian mythology which provides the informing framework of the text. Biblical allusions not only form the language of the novel but a correspondence between figures from christian mythology and the characters in the novel shows that Sahgal has a specific Romantic conception of history. There are three principal Christ-like figures in the novel. Shivraj is presented as a Christ himself when described through Michael's eyes as

> a man in white talking to what looked like a sea of people on the undulating hill terrain. He [Michael] was reminded of the Sermon on the Mount ... The scene was knit together in a harmony of its own, hillside and listeners inseparably woven...this timeless scene

> expressed an urge older, profounder than war. He felt that this man...held the key to the future, and the future began a day later when the Valley echoed with the news of Shivraj's arrest and removal to prison... (p. 46)

Others, such as Usman Ali and Naren are shown as bearing the burdens of Christ. Usman Ali, a Muslim who professes to be an atheist (p. 100), is shown in the novel as a leader whose audience forms 'a wobbly cross but a distinct one' (p. 163). Naren, a communist leader, achieves, in Rishad's eyes, a Christ-like status and a 'stark beauty' through 'the livid wounds on his back' (p. 103), and Rishad himself becomes an unwitting martyr in the cause for non-violence when he is killed in the very grenade attack he was seeking to prevent.

The use of religious terminology and metaphor as a cohesive framework is fully in keeping with White's description of the romance form:

> The Romance is fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it - the sort of drama associated with the Grail legend or the story of the resurrection of Christ in Christian mythology. It is a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice, of light over darkness, and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world in which he was imprisoned by the Fall.[24]

Hence death is made lovely. Martyrdom is seen as

beautiful: a natural outcome of the ethic of non-violence and belief in a cause. Sahgal's allegiance to them both can only be resolved through this return to endorsing self-sacrifice - an ethic common not only to Christian myth and the nationalist cause, but also, the novel suggests, integral to an effective 'revolution from the ground' (p. 117). Usman, the potential leader of the masses in this novel, is shown to reflect:

> Individual penance for individual salvation ... That was how progress and change might be brought about here, by touching the individual readiness for hardship, the personal desire for sacrifice. (p. 158)

This ideal comes under scrutiny in Rich Like Us.

Rich Like Us (1985): Brechtian Realism and The Emergency

In Sahgal's recent novels, Rich Like Us and Plans For Departure, women characters are presented in greater depth and complexity than in her earlier work. Their problems and experiences, though emerging from Sahgal's principal concern with broader political and national issues, are shown to constitute a distinct perspective - a feminist one - which embraces, rather than is embraced by, nationalist concerns. This is particularly evident in Plans For Departure in which Sahgal explores a Danish woman's search for meaning against the background of the suffragette movement. Yet within the context of contemporary India, Sahgal's attempt to portray a 'new model of the virtuous woman'[25] crumbles in the face of the reality of wide-scale political corruption: Rose, a woman of honesty and courage in Rich Like Us, is a victim of a culturally-sanctioned male oppression. Her murder is placed against the background of the ancient, but still enforced, practice of sati. It appears that despite their courage and their refusal 'to bend the knee'[26] the women of Sahgal's novels continue to be victims. In the following pages I will explore, through a formal analysis of Rich like Us, the way in which women - the symbols of a

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nation's conscience in Sahgal's work - are shown to be subjugated.

In Rich Like Us Sahgal shows how one kind of self-sacrifice, sati, is in fact a form of socially-enforced suicide that would be better defined as murder. The outlook of the novel is pessimistic and bleak. The tone is ironic, even cynical. It is as if Sahgal's early idealism breaks over the back of a broadly 'realist' depiction of the Emergency of 1975 - a two-year period when Indira Gandhi abolished representative government in favour of President's rule, when all civil rights were suspended, strikes banned, press censorship enforced, over ten thousand people taken as political prisoners, and 'all vestige of vocal opposition was eliminated' within twelve months.[27] In her attempt to convey the contradictions embodied by the Emergency Sahgal resorts to Brechtian techniques of generic multiplicity which both broaden and shatter the idealistic imperatives of the narrative. Consequently the novel plays out the clash of Sahgal's contending allegiances between realism and idealism. Rich Like Us is a novel of feminist and nationalist protest which eschews the seemingly simple ideological 'truths' of her early fiction. The Emergency is shown to make a mockery of all overtly political ideals by presenting them as part of the 'charade' of political life.

One of the key Brechtian techniques used by Sahgal is the juxtaposition of personal and historical perspectives. This results in a non-linear temporal structure, a kind of spatial form, that privileges a universal moral dimension over historically contingent events. The novel does not, as one critic has argued, 'show that the Emergency was not something that happened overnight, it was the consequence of the slow erosion of moral values which had set in, among the civil servants and the people at large, after Independence'[26] [my italics]. Sahgal's moral analogies cross over a broad spectrum of time - the remote historical past is made to bear upon the present (as between the Turkish dynasties and Nehru-Gandhi control or between nineteenth-century enforced 'self-sacrifice' and the modern treatment of widows) and even mythical events are brought to bear upon the everyday (as between the exile and oppression of the mythical heroine Sita and Rose's isolation and eventual murder). These analogies are clearly and consistently worked out. The correspondences Sahgal makes draw particular attention to shortcomings in the treatment of women and the abuse of human rights - abuses that are not endemic to a specific period in history or to a particular race. Sahgal seeks to provoke a critical awareness of certain essential elements of human suffering, developing an historically transcendent view found in A Situation in New Delhi.

I open my study of this novel by analysing its use of Brechtian techniques. I then go on to study the bearing of Sahgal's form on first the feminist imperatives of the text, and secondly her treatment of history. In the process I show how Sahgal's use of Brechtian realism is combined with a moral perspective which results in the collapse of material specificity and social and historical contingency into a universalised moral continuum.

Aspects of Brechtian Realism

Form, to Brecht, is both a means and an end. His plays employ alienation techniques such as montage, and, as one critic has put it, 'sought to demystify the notion of art as an autonomous and privileged "illusion" of life's integration by repeatedly exposing their own workings as changeable constructions'.[29] By taking on Brechtian forms Sahgal inevitably takes on some of his ideals too, but she remains faithful to a bourgeois conception of 'common humanity' and 'human essence' which Brecht expressly criticised in the following terms:

> The bourgeois theatre emphasised the timelessness of its objects. Its representation of people is bound by the alleged 'eternally human'. Its story is arranged in such a way as to create 'universal' situations that allow Man with a capital M to express himself: man of every period and every colour. All its incidents are just one enormous cue and this cue is followed by the 'eternal' response: the inevitable, human , natural, purely human response.

> ... This notion may allow that such a thing as history exists, but it is none the less unhistorical. A few circumstances vary, the environments are altered, but Man remains unchanged. History applies to the environment, not to Man.[30]

Brecht's critique provides an insight into the divided nature of Sahgal's novel. On the one hand, the novel describes and draws critical attention to the conflicting social voices of the Emergency; on the other, its broad historical analogies serve to efface historical differences and to present the Emergency as a moral condition rather than an historically contingent phenomenon.

The montage techniques are similar to the alienation technique found in Brecht's plays. Of this alienation technique, Terry Eagleton has argued that:

> ... far from forming an organic unity which carries an audience hypnotically through from beginning to end, [it] is formally uneven, interrupted, discontinuous, juxtaposing its scenes in ways which disrupt conventional expectations and force the audience into critical speculation on the dialectical relations between the episodes ... In this way the audience is constrained into a multiple awareness of several conflicting modes of representation. The result of these 'alienation effects' is, precisely to 'alienate' the audience from the performance, to prevent it from emotionally identifying with the play in a way which paralyses its powers of critical judgement.[31]

Sahgal's use of montage comprises a variety of elements:

a) Non-Linear Temporal Structure

Rich Like Us draws from different periods of time by interweaving a multitude of individual histories and perspectives. The first three chapters alone describe the point of view of three different characters - Neuman, Sonali and Rose respectively - who belong to different generations and to different cultures. This pattern of juxtaposed perspectives is maintained throughout the novel with the bulk of the text made up of the interweaving of Sonali's and Rose's viewpoints.

b) The Clash of Social Accents

The flow of the narrative is fractured into a multitude of contending and contrasting social voices. Sahgal skilfully intersperses interior monologue and dramatic third-person description with poignant dialogue in her reconstruction of events. From the friendly drawl of the American businessman, Goldfinkel, to the musical breathiness and mellifluence of the aristocratic Marcella; from the homely, robust effusions of Cockney Rose to the grammatical inversions of the loquacious Austrian Mrs Mathur who continues 'and happy it was making her to hear about a so marvellous movement called Chipko in the tradition of Mahatma Gandhi's satyagraha' (pp. 88-89).

This rendition of a multitude of social accents reveals the open-ended, conflicting social scene and evokes the turmoil of the time. For, as Volosinov has pointed out,

> Each word ... is a little arena for the clash and criss-crossing of differently orientated social accents. A word in the mouth of a particular individual person is a product of the living interaction of social forms.[32]

In Sahgal's novel they form part of the realist depiction of a broad social and historical tapestry and further this development in her fiction.

c) Myth and Modernity

Sahgal uses mythical analogies between her characters to draw attention to a particular aspect or condition of society. For example the the description of the 'hundreds of brick kilns along [the Ganges] that open and swallow women' (p. 75) and Rose's five-year separation from her husband (p. 215) are both directly related in the text to Sita's exile and eventual self-imposed death. These work to efface historical distinctions and set the novel on the level of a moral fable describing the human condition. That this condition must be challenged is revealed by the passage - framed within the context of the Ramayana myth - which describes Rose's final decision to fight for her

rights (p. 249). But as her attempts to do so are thwarted, the novel describes discord rather than success, thrashing its political ideals against a realist brick wall.

d) Generic Multiplicity

Rich Like Us contains a complex interplay of generic forms. The use of documentary forms such as extracts from newspapers, government circulars, history books and letters, is interspersed with wide-ranging quotations, from contemporary political slogans to classic poetry (for example the Bhagavad Gita, p. 214 and T.S.Eliot, p. 202); references to myths and parables; and even the detailed description of a satirical, and in many ways Brechtian, play (p. 212). The result is multiple registers of meaning that subvert the possibility of a homogenous outlook. They also serve to distance the reader from the subject described, creating a broadly 'Brechtian' critical perspective through presenting the text as discourse.

Yet the key example of generic multiplicity is worked to rather different effect, one that in fact functions as a moral centre of gravity in the text, drawing its apparent multiplicity into a clearly defined condemnation of female oppression in all its forms. The example in

question consists of the layering of documentary evidence in the personal manuscript found by Sonali (pp. 131-52). This lies, appropriately, at the very centre of the text. The manuscript, owned by Sonali's father and written by her grandfather in 1915 is quoted in full. It takes the form of a journal that combines personal anecdote with documentary evidence. In the journal, her grandfather recounts incidents and conversations from his family life, in particular those relating to his father, a leading advocate of the movement to abolish sati. It moves from the reported and direct speech of Sonali's great-grandfather, who believes Hinduism 'remains as uplifting as salvation, as destructive as slavery' (p. 134), to the private thoughts of her grandfather whose love for his mother gives him personal insight into the general attitude toward women.

These multiple voices are mutually supportive, rather than contending. Together they work to channel and charge the overall 'debate' on sati. The inclusion of chillingly restrained newspaper accounts from the nineteenth century describing one willing and one unwilling suttee provides a discursive and historical terrain against which is set the description of the ultimate horror : the sati of Sonali's great-grandmother which leads her son to question 'what kind of society is it that demands human sacrifice

to appease the bloodthirst of what gods ?' (p. 151). The narrowing of historical focus is thus parallelled by the increase in emotional empathy and the corresponding relevance of past events to the present day is made evident through their correlation in a single theme emphasising the moral thrust of the narrative.

All in all the passage serves not only to provide a concrete basis for the criticism of the political events of the present day, in particular the Emergency, but also to provide a thematic and ideological unity to the text that seeks to shape and direct the reader's judgement. Correspondences between the violent past and the corrupt present are tacitly invited. Sonali's grandfather's closing views have a deliberate ideological resonance:

> So I cannot believe in Hinduism, whatever Hinduism might be. Not because of such evils as sati, but because evil is not explained. If the universe is an illusion, and eternity is a split second , then in terms of the cosmos my mother's agony is nothing. And all suffering is nothing. But it is that twitch of time in the cosmos when I saw her there, when I would have given my life to drag her out of the fire, and killed those about me who had consigned her to it, that I want explained. And if evil has led us to where we stand then the ground beneath our feet, as my father used to say, is far from firm. (pp. 151-52)

These resonances remain on the level of thought only and are not translated into action. Sahgal closes the chapter

with an ironic observation as she describes the effect of the manuscript on Sonali:

> I put the manuscript down. ... I felt shaken. Illumination seems to come to me in the dark. When I switched off the bedside lamp I saw a world revealed, but strangely enough it was not the evil in it I saw. On a narrow parapet enclosing the funeral pyre I saw a boy of nineteen balancing dangerously...as he fought to kill his mother's murderers. Not all of us are passive before cruelty and depravity. ... I fell asleep to dream of heroisms whose company I was scarcely fit to keep. (p. 152)

By correlating the violence of the nineteenth century with that of the Emergency, Sahgal is able to offer both historical explanations for and appropriate moral responses to the latter. (We are told, for example, that in times of crisis people put their faith in the wrong leaders, giving opportunists the chance to gain power (p. 142).) The passage acts as an important moral touchstone, providing a critical perspective on the evils of the present. If, as Sonali's great-grandfather believed, history was sometimes 'a network of error, then the present was by no means terra firma' (p. 135) and what is necessary is active use of the moral conscience evoked during a 'twitch of time'. Yet though the passage demands a call to arms it describes sleep. Even though it is followed in the next chapter by a description of Rose's rescue of Mona from her self-constructed pyre (pp. 153-55), the subsequent events of the novel, as will be seen,

show the failure, or inadequacy of such heroisms to circumvent oppressions. The gap between Sahgal's idealism and her realism could not be greater.

Women as Registers of the Moral Climate

In A Situation in New Delhi Sahgal's heroine took a secondary role and was primarily an observer and critic - or even, as described in the novel, a mere ' remnant of a myth' (p. 130) - rather than a participant. In Rich Like Us women characters and women's issues take centre stage.

Sonali and Rose are the key participants in the novel. Sonali, one of a breed of independent 'new women' is single, and works for the Indian Civil Service. Rose, a warm-hearted, romantic Cockney, is married to a wealthy Indian businessman, Ram, who literally remains unconscious throughout the novel, having had a stroke. (Once again, as with Situation, Sahgal makes a key male figure absent, thereby presenting a negotiable moral space for other characters to fill.) Sonali and Rose represent the domains of the intellect and the instincts respectively. Sonali, academically bright as child, is described as 'the kind of woman who, highly concentrated on the subject in hand, is supposed to have "a man's mind" and who disappoints the flirtatious and the flippant' (p. 170). Rose, a friend of

Sonali's late father,is a humanist who speaks her own mind and acts on impulse. Hers is a common, universal humanity - part of the the eternal human response described by Brecht and validated by Sahgal in this novel. Speaking of her rescue of Mona who tried to burn herself to death, Rose explains '"It was my duty"', only to find her explanations framed into a religious context by her devout father-in-law. Although Rose keeps quiet she rejects this reduction of her human impulse into a Hindu outlook:

> You can't think how I've hated her, what frightful deaths I've wished on her ... If there's a fire, you jump in and rescue a person if you can, that's all. What's it to do with goodness and badness? But she sat there, her ordinary duty being transformed into Duty, herself into a live exhibit of Dharma, the austere morality he lived by. (p. 155)

Rose is the idealist whose feelings are shown to emerge from her immediate human response to the world around her. Her murder is in many ways synonymous with the death of idealism in Sahgal's work.

Rose's murder is symbolic of the murder of dreams and hopes. Her earlier compassion for the handless beggar is translated into moral terms: 'The handless salute left her thinking about his hands, and the struggle about his humanness. Wherever she saw him...she could picture him healed and whole, walking upright, running and leaping,

and each night becoming exultantly whole again by the light of the stars' (p. 90); and her poignant reflection recalls a similar refrain in The Day in Shadow:[33] 'A man should at least be able to wipe away his own tears' (p. 256). The beggar provides the answers in the novel: 'Sometimes it seemed to Rose that the only sane person around was the beggar. She thought about the journey shaped like an inverted question mark he made with such skill ...' (p. 221). His mutilation (the result of police brutality when he tried to claim his due as a peasant farmer) serves as a continual point of reference in the text. Its cause is unknown until the close of the text and serves as a moral statement - one that calls attention to the condition of a society that silences protest through violent means.

The treatment of women is one index of the moral climate. The juxtaposition of sati and the murder of Rose is part of a broader network of analogies (e.g. the quiet equation of Bimmie's orthodox marriage with slavery (p. 54)) which allow Sahgal to elide temporal strictures with sweeping but apt correlations between the barbarity of remote historical periods and the brutality of the modern day. The Emergency is described as a dictatorship comparable with previous oppressive powers such as the Mughals and the Turks, but one which has become

naturalised (p. 91) in a modern political dynasty: Indira Gandhi (always referred to as 'the Madam' or 'She' in the novel), her father and son comprise, it is suggested, 'a regular Holy Trinity' (p. 173). The novel describes a topsy-turvy world where nothing is as it seems [34] - where a biscuit factory's van 'with Custard Cream Crunchies for tea painted in pink on it' (p. 90) is the principal vehicle for transporting the poor to vasectomy camps and Happyola, a soft drinks company would 'store underground hidden wares for car manufacture, while machines produced a fizzy brown drink above' (p. 51).

The lacerating criticism of contemporary ills - all the more powerful for its use of sardonic humour - is expanded in the sections presented from Sonali's perspective. With heavy irony, she notes the discrepancy between the vocal and uncompromising recommendation of marriage as the ideal state for women and the reality of child widows (p. 56), and the work of those middle-class women who support the Emergency by making sure their women servants have their tubes tied (p. 86). Sonali provides the principal feminist critique in the narrative; and in her refusal, as a university student, to subscribe to any established doctrine she reveals the need for forming an alternative view of the world. Reflecting on her lover's

impassioned plea for remaining true to Marxist doctrine she argues:

> I think he said that because he was a man. He had never fought a battle for freedom, never been patted down firmly when his sap was rising, never had a sari throttling his legs, making walking in the wind and running to catch a bus a threat to life and limb, never had his mother set up a howl when he went and got a haircut. He had no idea what the simplest subjugations were about. I, who did, had no intention of chaining myself to any doctrine when I had just lost some of my chains. (p. 112)

History: The Romantic and Ironic Perspectives

Rich Like Us embodies the clash between Sahgal's contending allegiances to formal realism and her idealist sympathies, and, furthermore, the failure of her idealism in the face of her realist enterprise. (Her later novels are set in the pre-Independence past where her political ideals have an undisputed relevance and practicability.) The dual perspectives of the romantic Rose and the intellectual Sonali form two contrasting approaches to history. Both, in different ways, exist on the margins of society; both lack strong family links and are childless; and as a result both bring to bear on history a certain 'detached' perspective - and one which expresses itself in moral rather than social terms.

It is almost as if their moral significance is made to compensate for their relative social insignificance. The nature of this insignificance is demonstrated in the description of Sonali's great-grandmother: her widowhood leads her to being ignored by relatives whose 'callous indifference seemed to make her the centre of their attention, as a big hole in the centre of a canvas will constantly draw one's eyes to it' (p. 147). Left vulnerable and defenceless, she is forced against her will to become a suttee. Sahgal draws a direct analogy between her fate and that suffered, albeit in a different form, by Rose. Rose's childlessness and impending widowhood make her 'neither wife nor widow' (p. 79) but simply a financial liability and embarrassment. Like Sonali's great-grandmother, she becomes a social inconvenience. She is murdered at the instigation of her son-in-law, and her death is explained away as an accident.

In this moral domain, the focus of Sahgal's interest is not history but time. Sahgal's ironic voice describes history as subject to distortion - the collective memory of various opportunistic 'rememberers' (p. 163) - so that the only certainty is an ahistorical, metaphysical time where 'the present is merely the flicker between the long long time past and the things that haven't yet happened but most assuredly will, in the clockless dateless

membrane that holds them [her characters] all' (p. 218). Such a remorseless, deterministic view of time effaces the possibility of effective struggle against oppression (though not its value) and therefore reinforces a fatalistic view of life. Such fatalism is of course exactly what all Sahgal's earlier work had sought to repudiate. In Rich Like Us Rose's final confrontation lies in her acknowledging the weaknesses of her romantic, passive, fatalistic nature and in her tragically belated determination to change. She is killed not only because she is a financial liability but because she poses a moral threat.

> All of it had convinced her fate had taken several, stupid, blundering turns, or rather that silly, preventable disasters could hardly be called fate. And even if that's what it was - the powers who were supposed to know better being as vicious as they were, e.g. their barbarous treatment of Sita - of course had to be fought. ... Around Rose insistent voices whispered it wasn't too late to tackle Dev, to try for justice, make scenes for it ... She was on her knees in the act of getting up when a cloth came down over her head, arms pinned her down and she heard a thick satisfied grunt as she lost consciousness. (pp. 248-49)

Fatalism is thus rejected on a political level but Sahgal's realist enterprise forces her to concede to it on the level of action. In the process she has had to confront the relevance of her own ideals of service and

dedication to non-violence and their application to the present day. It is a process that has clearly had a profound effect on Sahgal who told me that after the Emergency her conception of an 'idealist, emerging nation' reached 'a dead end'. Ever since writing Rich Like Us, she claimed, she has felt 'free from ch ronology'.[35] Let us see where this sense of freedom has taken her.

Plans For Departure (1986): New Beginnings?

If Rich Like Us describes disillusionment with the present Plans For Departure describes escape into the past. Like Sahgal's latest novel, Mistaken Identity, it is set in the pre-Independence past. Yet, as will be seen, the past no longer offers the same assurance or security for the author. Like her most recent work the tone is reflective rather than exhortative. It is as if Sahgal has been chastened into self-doubt.

Plans For Departure is a love-story rather than a political novel. It is not so much history as time, not so much political advocacy as recognition of the fallibility of human judgement, that are its central concerns. Set in 1914 and the years immediately succeeding it, the novel tells the story of Anna Hansen, a Danish woman who in appearance, manner, posture and habit resembles Sahgal's childhood Danish governess described in Prison and Chocolate Cake. (She is of indeterminate age, practises 'sun-worship', has an erect bearing, is a theosophist, enjoys walking and values personal independence.) The central events of the novel take place during three months of Anna's visit to India which she spends in the isolated hill-town of Himapur as secretary to an eccentric

scientist, Sir Nitin Basu, whose thesis is that plants feel pain. Here she meets and comes under the spell of the local district magistrate, Henry Brewster, whose wife, Stella, has recently and unexpectedly disappeared, supposedly on a holiday. As the novel unfolds it becomes increasingly clear that Stella is not going to return and when Anna discovers the body of Stella's pet spaniel in a treacherous ravine, she becomes suspicious that the man she is attracted to might be responsible for his wife's murder. The question of Brewster's guilt is not answered till some years later when Anna has returned to England: at first she receives evidence that leads her to confirm her suspicions and it is not until some years after her marriage (and after Brewster's death) that she discovers that he was innocent after all.

This may all seem to make for a straightforward mystery-romance - a new direction for Sahgal. Yet seen in the context of Sahgal's other work it is evident that Plans for Departure describes a retreat in both time and place for both author and protagonist. The novel marks a break in Sahgal's characteristic interrogation of the present through the eyes of the past. Rather it is the past that is the object of scrutiny, and which is shown to be illumined by the present. (Three-quarters of the way through the novel there is a brief temporal leap to 1961

and a description of Anna as her grand-daughter, Gayatri, and her grand-son-in-law, Jason, see her, and the last chapter makes temporal juxtapositions between the two periods.) In the process Sahgal shows how the moral domain is negotiable as Brewster, who becomes something of a martyr, is mistaken for a murderer and his foil, the missionary Croft, is in all probability a murderer who wears religious costume. The setting, a remote, rural hill-town, forms a contrast to Sahgal's urban settings, and the privileging of imagination over fact marks a further development in her fiction.

I will study three aspects of the novel: its formal structure; its treatment of history; and the ideological imperatives of the text. By way of a conclusion to my analysis of Sahgal I will suggest in what way, and for what reasons, Sahgal's central concerns as a novelist have changed in the course of her long literary career.

Formal Structure

The novel marks a significant development in Sahgal's formal allegiances in two ways: first, the narrative has a broadly linear temporal structure and, secondly, it is written entirely in the third person. Different points of view are represented by stream-of-consciousness interior

monologue or, more obviously, by citations from personal letters. Quotations from Tilak's speeches, letters, writings and press releases are used primarily for the purpose of drawing the historical background - Sahgal herself has told me in an interview that Tilak is little more than an 'atmosphere' in the novel - rather than providing the focal point of interest or being part of a project that promotes generic multiplicity, as in Rich Like Us. This difference is furthered by the fact that interior monologue is worked to very different effect from the juxtaposing of several points of view found in her previous novels. Whereas in these Sahgal sought to uphold the validity of a definable political perspective, in Plans For Departure they are worked to convey the isolation of given individuals.

The emphasis of the novel is therefore different from that of its predecessors. The central point of interest lies in its analysis of individual character, which is shown to be mutable, and the shifting of moral boundaries as Brewster changes from being a hero-victim to a wife-murderer to victim once more in the eyes of Anna. As one critic has pointed out, in Sahgal's novels 'morality ceases to be isolated from the rest of human life and becomes a growing part of life'.[36] The movement of the narrative works to create a feeling of unease and

insecurity. Take for example the passage where, after Anna's emotional release (related through the transcription of her letter to Nicholas), we are brought to the realisation that Brewster had been reading her private correspondence all along:

> I'm not writing at all in English this time, as I have too many things on my mind... Henry told me today that the beauteous Stella is not coming back. The uncertainty had been a strain on him and I should have thought anything would have been better than going on groping in thin air, but he has taken it like news of a death. I see a priest emerging out of that pale fire, a consuming religious dedication taking the place of his love for Stella. ... His melancholy has been like a wall in the way of real communication. Trespassers will be prosecuted. Yet I have a great and growing desire to trespass.
>
> And only after she had posted her letter did she realise she had forgotten to say anything about the far continent called Europe.
>
> Henry read her handwriting with ease. He was familiar with her English, with her French, and along with dearest Nicholas, he was privy to her thoughts. ... (pp. 117-18)

From direct relation of Anna's letter the text moves into third person narrative and then into interior monologue again through a description of Brewster's reflections. The pattern emphasises the barrier between characters and leaves a space for mystery to grow.

Indeed, to a large extent the novel develops the use of an absent figure to provide a negotiable moral space:

Stella, physically absent for most of the novel, is a central preoccupation for Brewster, and the reason for her absence is the cause of Anna's concern. Tilak is another absent figure of interest to Anna; she becomes 'fascinated by someone she never saw' (p. 143). Romance and idealism are only possible, the novel seems to argue, if everything is not known. The past, too, becomes the site, not of moral and political certainties, but of blurred edges and mystery. This emerges strongly in the reflections of Anna's grandson-in-law on Anna's letters which he is studying as source material on pre-war India:

> She had said facts as plain as day, had dimmed, blurred and disappeared before her very eyes. Impossibly fantastic things had seemed to happen. Absence had been easier to grasp than presence. And the only thing that had never let her down through it all was a queer current of kinship. She had felt an inexplicable affection for people she had met just once or twice, and for some she had not met at all. (p. 145)

This sense of an 'impossibly fantastic' history held together by 'a queer current of kinship' echoes Sahgal's first published works, her autobiographies. The wheel has come full circle it seems. Let us see to what extent her vision of history has altered.

Metaphysical History: The Eternal Present and The Woman's View

In Plans For Departure specific periods of history are evoked, and parallels between them drawn, to give the impression of an eternal metaphysical time that forces on the concept of 'moral truth' a necessary and inevitable conditionality - 'the aesthetics of a particular situation', as Sahgal has termed it.[37]

Such conditionality is most evident in the juxtaposition of the stories of Tulsidas and Brewster, which has multiple resonances that deserve to be explored. Tulsidas, whose biography Anna is reading, so loved his deserting wife that he endangers his own life in order to reach her. She, horrified at the lengths to which he is prepared to go, tells him that 'a passion like his cannot be wasted on a mortal frame ... he is on the path, if he only can see it, to the love of God' (p. 114). The parallel between the experiences of Tulsidas and that of the long-suffering, priestly Brewster, who 'sacrifices' himself at the Somme whilst still deeply in love with a wife who doesn't love him, is self-evident. What is even more interesting is the fact, briefly mentioned in the novel, that Tulsidas - a man who is remembered in India for claiming that 'Women, untouchables and drums are for

beating' - himself was something of a biographer 'having gone down in history as a saint after he had written the Ramayana' (p. 114) - a story celebrating a woman's exile, devotion to and self-sacrifice for her doubting husband. (This has another ironic parallel in the novel in the form of the exile and sudden death - or murder - of Lucille Croft. Sahgal has once again returned to her preoccupation with murder being concealed.)

The contrast which Sahgal draws between reality and fiction, and the way one is really an inverse of the other, is striking. Reality is constantly embellished and transformed by the operation of the individual or collective memory. As Anna reflects:

> Who could say where myth ended and history began, whether men or gods had hurled thunderbolts at houses and guardian fortresses? Memory had preserved those images down to the last lightening-struck infant blown far and wide by the winds. And what could be more enduring than memory? What else, so to speak could be indefinitely preserved, like flowers frozen at peak freshness in lakes of ice, for the scrutiny of later more scientific times? (p. 45)

This transforming power is evident in the text itself. The central concern of the text is to reveal the hold that certain undefined emotions - 'for men and events [Anna] knew little or nothing of' (p. 106) - have on Anna long after she has left India. Women, it appears, have access to this collective memory. Just as women's conversation

draws from a communal source - 'They were all dipping into a communal conversation, jointly owned, instead of taking turns at it' (p. 90) - so they have access to an ahistorical realm, or an eternal present. The very form of Anna's speech is an example of this - her inability to conjugate tenses in English means that 'she lived perpetually in the present' (p. 14). The nature of this metaphysical world is described by the photographer, Madhav Rao, who himself has a 'vigorous grip on the abstract' (p. 197) : '"Past, present, future are not divided. Seen from outside the mind they are one "' (p. 54).

The assertion in the novel of the importance of a metaphysical reality is supported by the events of the text that show, in Anna's words, how 'we were all each other's history' (p. 209) and what happens 'when this lifetime gets temporarily displaced by events of the lifetime before' (p. 208). This emphasis marks a distinct development in Sahgal's work, a move away from the synchronic representation of the political present found in her earlier work.

This is evident in the very language of the text, which is rich in metaphors that employ abstract and vaguely spiritual terminology - 'Stella was superimposed

like a flame across his consciousness' (p. 96). Such metaphysical terms, which in the novel become linguistic markers for a predominantly - but by no means exclusively - female sensibility, have clear historical links with the theosophist movement founded by Helena Blavatsky (a movement often referred to in the novel and which is of particular interest to Anna).

History too is rewritten in terms of female registers of meaning and in terms of women's experience. Plans For Departure draws from the feminist background of the British suffragette movement. Emily Davison's funeral (p. 67), European women's fashions (p. 174), Queen Mary (p. 16), Helena Blavatsky and the theosophist movement, the Danish Women's Society (which has Mr Hansen's support), the war recruitment of women, all combine to create a primarily feminist, European view of history in which women become the agents, rather than merely the observers or victims, of change. Plans For Departure is peopled with women who for one reason or another leave their husbands or lovers - Stella, Lucille Croft, the wife of Tulsidas, and even Anna herself, have all done just that. All are described as ahead of their time. Many of the observations made about Anna, in particular, are made with a view to showing that she is a pioneer who finds the conventional outlook on women's role stifling. Plans For

Departure then is retrospectively (and therefore unchallengingly) celebratory.

Retreat into a 'Lost World'

The novel's concern with a metaphysical, ahistorical realm of meaning is further reinforced by its thematic concern with the breakdown of order and reason. No longer do we find in Sahgal's work contention between idealism and realism, with its implication that out of such conflict can arise a stable and universal set of truths and values. Instead, we find an acceptance that history and personal destiny are governed by chance, by accidental circumstance, by the instability of individual actions and judgements. The pressures of this morally contingent world, with its threat of chaos and its implied command that notions of 'right' and 'wrong' be constantly renegotiated, leads Anna to retreat into the sanctuary of another period of time. The mystery of Stella's disappearance leads Anna to reflect:

> Present truths were so tangled. they yielded almost nothing, willingly, to one's gaze. It was easier to deal with the distant past, or even the distant future. (p. 55)

This seems a fitting commentary on Sahgal's approach to the Indian political present too. The author, through

the central figure of Anna, who was based on a governess, appears to have retreated to a period of mystery and wonder that recalls Sahgal's own personal past.[38] This is evident in the description of Himapur as 'the primal world one left behind in childhood, the lost realm of infinite detail one repossessed only in dreams' (p. 210). These dreams and memories that 'kept one alive and stirring belonged to lost opportunity, the road one might have taken, for there was no release from the embrace of things that had never happened' (p. 213).

This does not mean that Sahgal has relinquished her political allegiances, but that in the course of her literary career the boundaries of these allegiances have shifted. From revealing a concern with the future of India her novels come to stress a more universal human dimension that, in Plans For Departure, emanates from her thematic concern with a woman's experience. She does this by filtering her description of the past through the grid of the present and in the process, through a formal and thematic engagement with temporal dislocation and with women's relationship with history, comes to privilege the imagination over the real.

Notes and References

1. Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, p. 22.
2. Brecht defined realism as 'a political and ideological end whose formal means were variable, according to the dictates of time and place'. See Adorno et al, Aesthetics and Politics, p. 149.
3. Hayden White, Metahistory, p. 14.
4. Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious, p. 298.
5. This interplay has led Iyengar to write of the novel 'It is difficult to escape the feeling that the action and the characterisation haven't been properly integrated and placed in right relation to the background'. K.R.S. Iyengar, Indian Writing in English, p. 472.
6. Whereas Markandaya's novel works to demythologise the period of colonial rule revealing both the injustice carried out by the British and the injustices practised by a section of the Indian population, Sahgal's novel works to construct a myth of national unity - Markandaya's novel is socially-critical; Sahgal's is celebratory.
7. The passage reads:'The tempo of Indian life must be infused into our Indian expression, even as the tempo of American or Irish life has gone into theirs. We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly. There must be something in the sun of India that makes us rush and tumble and run on. And our paths are

paths interminable. The Mahabharatha has 214,778 verses and the Ramayana 48,000. Puranas there are endless and numerable. We have neither punctuation nor the treacherous 'ats' and 'ons' to bother us - we tell one interminable tale. Episode follows episode, and when our thoughts stop our breath stops, and we move on to another thought. This was and still is the ordinary style of our story-telling.' Raja Rao, Kanthapura, p. 6.

8. See my section on The Day in Shadow.

9. It is interesting to note that the brief section in the novel alluding to both Maya's name, which means 'illusion', and her association with the moon (pp.62 and 68) corresponds to Desai's portrait of Maya in Cry the Peacock.

10. See Duley and Edwards, The Cross-Cultural Study of Women, p. 197. Within the lower castes divorce takes place outside formal channels.

11. Mentioned in Sahgal's 'Interview' in Indian Literary Review, p. 11, and repeated to me.

12. M.M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, pp. 441 and 337.

13. Ken Hirschkop, 'Introduction' to Bakhtin and Cultural Theory, p. 18.

14. White, pp. 8-11.

15. Ibid., p. 29. White's study of historical discourse is based upon distinguishing three principal levels of

conceptualization: explanation by emplotment which describes 'the way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is revealed to be a story of a particular kind' (p. 7) - the basic forms of these are Romance, Comedy, Tragedy and Satire; explanation by formal argument which 'provides an explanation of what happens in the story by invoking principles of combination which serve as putative ways of explanation' (p. 11) - the basic forms of these are the Formist, Organicist, Mechanistic and Contextualist; and explanation by ideological implication in which 'the ideological dimensions of a historical account reflect the ethical element in the historian's assumptions of a particular position on the question of the nature, of the historical process' (p. 22) - the basic positions of which are Anarchism, Conservatism, Radicalism and Liberalism. White argues that these modes have elective affinities by which he means that particular combinations of these modes are compatible and give coherence and unity to a text. One such compatible combination is that of the Romantic, Formist and Anarchist modes.

16. Indeed many aspects of this novel - the use of an air-conditioner to show insulation from the real world (p. 16); the detailed description of sumptuous interior decor and delicious food - bear resemblances to Jhabvala's portraits of Indian high society.

17. White, p. 14.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., pp. 13-14.

20. Sahgal, 'Interview', p. 12.

21. White, p.24.

22. Ibid., p. 24.

23. Ibid., pp. 24 and 25.

24. Ibid., pp. 8-9.

25. A term Sahgal used in my interview with her on 29 August 1989.

26. A term used in The Day In Shadow.

27. Stanley Wolpert, A New History of India, pp. 397-404.

28. S.A. Narayan, 'India', JCL (1986), p. 82.

29. Lunn, Marxism and Modernism, p. 119.

30. Brecht quoted in John Willett, Brecht on Theatre, pp. 96-97.

31. Terry Eagleton, pp. 66-67.

32. Volosinov, Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, p. 41.

33. 'There is no more suffering in the world than one human being can bear'.

34. In this respect the novel may be compared to Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children - another novel which was inspired by the Emergency.

35. Sahgal added that she was currently writing a novel set in the period of the Second World War.

36. Jasbir Jain, 'The Aesthetics of Morality', pp. 47-48.

37. Sahgal quoted in Jain, see above, p. 47.

38. Sahgal's latest novel also centres on a mystery and the pre-Independence era.

INTRODUCTION TO ANITA DESAI: THE FEMALE PRISM

Anita Desai as an Indian Woman Novelist

Anita Desai is the youngest of the three novelists in this study. Her work, begun sixteen years after Independence, marks a fundamental shift from the formal and ideological concerns of Markandaya and Sahgal. Whereas the early novels of Markandaya and Sahgal reflect, in different ways, a sympathy towards Hindu ideology and describe it as a touchstone of national identity, Desai's work reveals the tyrannical and unshakeable hold of Hindu belief and is critical of traditions such as the belief in karma (Cry The Peacock) and the joint family (Voices in the City), and shows in one of her most recent works, In Custody, the stultification of a society entrenched in the past.

Given this critical perspective why is it that Desai appears, (in particular in such novels as Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Clear Light of Day which describe women who rebel against their condition finally, wilfully, giving in), to subscribe to a philosophy of acceptance?

Towards a Definition of Indian Literary Feminism

The answer is to be traced to three clear developments in her oeuvre: a formal development (from a modernist preoccupation with the fragmented individual consciousness to a realist concern with the unitary self); an ideological development (from a negative form of protest to acceptance or, to use Camus' term, 'absolute affirmation') and a thematic development (from a woman-centred narrative to a male-centred one).

These developments are complementary. In her novels of 'protest' Desai's modernism draws upon a philosophy that owes as much to Western existentialism as to Hindu metaphysics; her depiction of the private world of the individual, in particular the world of the individual woman, is given a cultural context through her use of Hindu myth - a technique that Lunn has described as a feature of symbolist modernism. In her later novels, which I describe as the novels of 'acceptance', Desai increasingly engages with national issues, describing a male world where instead of self-destructive revolt, women are the shown to have to make a sacrifice of a different kind - what Desai describes as 'a compromise with life'.[1]

In this introduction I will analyse each of these developments. I will argue that although in her early work, such as Cry The Peacock and Voices in the City,

Desai's feminism offers a challenge against female oppression which, paradoxically, is contained by a belief in the impossibility of change - a form of protest that is yoked to despair - her later work, such as Clear Light of Day and In Custody, is predicated on an analysis of the mechanics of oppression that conceptually frees her characters from the tyranny of fatalism. Hence I argue that while the 'protest' in Desai's novels is pessimistic, the 'acceptance' towards which that protest leads carries with it many elements that, in terms of the novels, are positive. The other novel in my study, Where Shall We Go This Summer?, is a transitional work belonging to both the categories of 'protest' and 'acceptance', and for this reason I will refer to it as Desai's middle novel. First I will analyse the formal development in her writing.

Formal Development: Modernism in Desai's Novels

Anita Desai's work has been described as one that contains a 'modern sensibility'.[2] This is an accurate description which must, however, be qualified in the light of one of her most recent texts, In Custody, which contains a tension between modernist concerns and some elements commonly associated with the realist text. Nonetheless, her early work certainly contains the formal and ideological elements that Eugene Lunn has used to

define modernist writing. They are Aesthetic Self-Consciousness or Self-Reflexiveness; Simultaneity, Juxtaposition or 'Montage'; Paradox, Ambiguity and Uncertainty; and the 'Dehumanisation' and the Demise of the Integrated Individual Subject or Personality.[3]

In her early novels, Cry The Peacock and Voices in the City, Desai's modernism takes a specific form. It shares those elements of modernism which Lunn has described as 'symbolist' in which the 'seeming pointlessness and ennui of sequential time ... dissolve[s] through a sensuous voyage in imagination'.[4] These novels describe the thoughts and imagination of female characters who are bored, frustrated, lonely and waiting. It also describes the disastrous results of such frustration. Maya's sensuous reflections lead her into madness and murder in Cry The Peacock and Monisha in Voices in the City has a 'morbid imagination' (p. 199) which contributes to her eventual suicide.

Lunn has also argued that such modernists have an 'obsession with decay and death' claiming:

> symbolists often used their formal technique in a way which reinforced a sense of social impotence, as in the cultivation of an aesthetic of death. Much symbolist work...assumes and strengthens a fatalistic feeling of the loss of mastery and control of a congealed and unyielding social mechanism.[5]

Such an 'obsession' is evident in Desai's seeming fatalism in these novels where characters - in particular the female ones - are shown to feel a sense of social impotence. In Cry The Peacock the action follows a fatalistic logic reaffirming the inevitability of a soothsayer's prophecy in the very act of fighting it. In Voices in the City fate and death are deified in the depiction of the goddess Kali embodied by the city of Calcutta. In these early novels, Desai combines mythical elements with a fragmented and poeticised formal structure to explore the subjective worlds of her characters. But the meaning of the novels is not confined to this subjective level: rather it points to the society beyond - a society whose prejudice, pettiness and oppression impinge on the individual and generate the particular forms of mental suffering found in so many of Desai's characters. In this respect, Desai's novels, while clearly focussing on individual psychology and subjective experience, also offer what Adorno has called a 'negative knowledge of the actual world',[6] exposing its contradictions and, in doing so, challenging the alienation and oppression to which those contradictions give rise.

Lunn has also claimed that symbolists 'built metaphorical bridges between ancient and modern

myths...which by aesthetically clothing the naked objects...allowed the concentration to dwell upon them'.[7] Cry The Peacock, Voices in the city and Desai's middle novel, Where Shall We Go This Summer?, contain characters who, in both name and nature, are drawn from mythical and religious archetypes: Maya (whose name means 'illusion') and Gautama (who shares the Buddha's name and characteristics) in the first novel; Mother Kali (the goddess of death and destruction) and Dharma (whose name means religious tradition and social duty) in the second novel, and Sita and Raman (evocative of the mythical couple in the Ramayana) in Where Shall We Go This Summer?. Desai herself told me she used these archetypes to distance herself from the characters as 'the emotion is so stark and the field of vision so restricted' that by using mythical archetypes she hoped to 'overcome these limitations'.[8]

Yet in these novels Desai does more than distance herself from her characters. As will be seen in my third section, where I analyse the thematic development in Desai's writing, they create a dissonance between past and present and posit an alternative view of the world. For the moment, it is important to recognise that Desai does not continue to use mythical archetypes for subversive purposes or to express protest in her later work. In Fire

on the Mountain and Clear Light of Day myth is found on a more general level and is mapped by references to such (western) writers as T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence drawing upon the cosmic aspects of their work. Whereas in her earlier work Desai uses myth to affirm the centrality and power of Indian philosophy and to criticise it, in her later work we see allusions to western mythological writing that provide the framework not of protest but of aesthetic resolution.

This generalisation of myth is paralleled by a change of emphasis in Desai's work. In the middle and later novels death and fate come to be replaced by a gradual affirmation of life with all its problems and paradoxes. It is a development in outlook that Desai herself has recognised. When I asked her about the stark ending of Cry The Peacock, she said that were she to write the novel today the 'protest element' would be made more strongly and Maya 'probably would not sacrifice herself the way she does'. She compared it to Where Shall We Go This Summer? and told me that the two works were closely linked and that whereas one character (Maya) chose murder, the other (Monisha) had a choice only between suicide and acceptance. Reflecting upon the shift in perspective between these novels she said 'one has to compromise'. When I put it to her that in any compromise two parties

normally agreed to conditions which are of mutual benefit, and that the 'compromise' of the characters in her novels wasn't compromise at all but rather submission, she quietly disagreed claiming that her characters made a 'compromise with life'.

This shift in perspective, in which Desai comes to concentrate less on the psychological effects of oppression and more on its social constituents, can be translated into existential terms. When drawing Desai's work against the conceptual grid of what Camus - a writer whose work is repeatedly quoted in Voices in the City - has described as 'metaphysical rebellion', it will be seen that Desai's ideology of acceptance draws from two complementary philosophies: Western existentialism and Hinduism.

Ideological Development: From Protest to Affirmation

In The Rebel, Camus delineates the course of what he describes as 'metaphysical rebellion'. It is form of existential protest expressed in literature and art that goes through four stages. The first and final stages can be discerned in the work of Desai.[9]

The first stage is a period of protest against the crime of existence which involves the denial of meaning in any values, and the justification of suicide and murder. It is a stage that describes an aspiration to order and unity but rejects the present order.

The final stage is one of absolute affirmation which describes a will to live believing in nothing - where 'freedom becomes a voluntary prison'. The writer deifies fate in such a way that 'the individual is lost in the destiny of the species and the eternal movement of the spheres' and the 'joy of self-realization is the joy of annihilation'.[10]

The first and final stages of metaphysical rebellion can be charted in Desai's oeuvre. Her first novel clearly conforms to the concept of 'protest' described by Camus. Her heroine chooses murder and a form of self-sacrifice tantamount to suicide. In her next novels which include Voices in the City and Bye-Bye Blackbird, her heroines are torn between acquiescence and suicide, and in her middle work Where Shall We Go This Summer? her heroine chooses to affirm life and return to her urban home. In her more recent work Clear Light of Day we see the depiction of what Camus has described as 'absolute affirmation': her heroine chooses not only to affirm life but also succeeds

in resolving (at a price) the tension she experiences between the social demands made upon her and her spiritual needs.

Yet there is a fundamental difference in the form of 'absolute affirmation' described by Camus and that found in the work of Desai. Her later novels, far from describing a 'deification of fate', show how her heroines make a conscious, almost heroic, decision to live. It is a political choice denoting a moral victory. Desai's ideological development cannot therefore be defined in the terms of Western existentialism alone. Set in the context of Hindu philosophy it can be seen that Desai's novels describe a development towards a stage of self-awareness. This is emphasised in one Indian critic's reading of her oeuvre which argues that:

> the thematic development of mental experience in the novels can be traced through three stages of self-delusion, fragmentation... and finally visionary intuition. The awakening of the woman's [the female character's] consciousness progresses to the psychology of self-realization. She [the character] achieves self-awareness by defining herself against social matrices.[11]

What we see in Desai's work is a movement towards an 'absolute affirmation' which is in active dialogue with the social. In Voices in the City, Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Clear Light of Day she shows women who choose

to return to the mundaneity of daily existence. For the female characters in Desai's novels, unlike the male heroes of Voices and In Custody who experience a form of aesthetic resolution, affirmation does not mean a complete acceptance of the prevailing order. Rather it marks a state of consciousness, an active engagement and commitment tc life, which means for women characters such as Amla in Voices, Sita in Summer? and Bim in Clear Light of Day, not a resolution of conflict but a return to it.

Anita Desai's quest for meaning, what she has described as her 'effort to discover, to underline and convey the true significance of things',[12] is not just an abstract concern. Her novels make the reader painfully aware of the link between social causality and psychological damage. It is impossible to respond to Desai's characters without responding to the social system that produced them. Her interest in the 'human condition' which she has defined in Ortega y Gasset's words as 'the terror of facing single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence',[13] leads her in in the course of her writing career to devise a stark moral philosophy which posits that an individual woman must either 'Accept or Die'.[14] It is a philosophy that is of particular relevance to her women characters who are shown to be divided in their allegiances, and belong to those 'whose heart cries out

"the great No"'.[15] As I will show below a symptomatic reading of Desai's novels reveal her to be powerful feminist writer in whose work we see the tensions of a writer who, by using the western form of writing comes to express a distinctive form of Indian feminist protest.[16]

Thematic Development: From Self to Society

The novel, as G. P. Sarma has pointed out, is a western import.[17] It is also a form of writing which focuses on the individual - a concept that is alien to the Indian philosophical and cultural tradition.[18] As Desai herself told me 'there is no such thing [as the concept of] the individual in India, but since the experience of the individual runs counter to this there is an inevitable conflict'. She went on to say that it is the 'conflict between the inner and the outer that leads to writing'.

This conflict between the inner and outer worlds, between personal experience and social reality, is mediated in six of her nine novels through the consciousness of a middle-class Indian woman whose awareness, like a prism, reflects and refracts the reality around her. Her novels show women who are fundamentally divided between fulfilling their own individual needs and

meeting their social obligations. Even Desai's main English female character, Sarah in Bye-Bye Blackbird, feels what Meenakshi Mukherjee calls 'the strain of playing a double role'.[19]

This emphasis on women's experience of the world is integrated into a concept of gender that holds that women and men experience the world differently. Desai holds that women writers 'place...their emphasis differently from men...having a very different set of values'.[20] In this she appears to share Virginia Woolf's view, though Woolf translates this difference in perspective into overtly political terms:

> It is probable...in both life and art that the values of a woman are not the values of a man. Thus when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what to him is important.[21]

Desai's view that women perceive life differently from men extends into her fiction - particularly in her earliest novels - where women characters are shown to contrast completely with their male counterparts. Thus in Cry The Peacock the heroine is shown to exemplify irrational, sensual and creative impulses whilst her husband, Gautama, embodies the qualities of reason, detachment and diplomacy 'where breeding, culture, leisure

and comfort have been brought to a nice art' (p. 45). These broad distinctions of character made on the basis of gender assume a symbolic value whereby every female protagonist in the early novels, despite her class, becomes representative of all womankind. This reduces her protagonists to an essence which denies their capacity for changing their environment. Desai's protest in these early novels is articulated through two narrative devices: the depiction of the stark choice women have to face and the use of mythical archetypes.

Desai invests the suffering of her women characters with a mythic significance. In doing so she offers an alternative perspective that interrogates and deconstructs traditional ideologies. For example, Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? is not simply the 'modern version of her mythical namesake', as one critic has put it;[22] - she is also a character whose unconventional behaviour, such as smoking, and whose sense of being 'bored, dull, unhappy, frantic' in marriage and motherhood (p. 144), creates a fundamental dissonance between the ancient Indian ideal and the modern Indian reality. In Summer? Sita's departure for a magical island draws upon and subverts the mythical framework of the Ramayana, serving to question the fundamental ideal of Indian womanhood and the perception that the mythical Sita's final return to

her home is the result of uncritical acceptance and wifely devotion.

Desai's early use of Indian mythical archetypes is also evidence of how she negotiates a reconciliation in her art between the Eastern philosophy of acceptance and detachment, with her Western-modernist concern with describing the disorientating effects of capitalism and the city on the individual. She uses myth both to affirm the centrality and power of Indian philosophy and to criticise it. The very fact that her women characters have to face the stark choice of either acceptance or suicide poses, as Masilamani points out, a 'challenge to every thinking Indian for a revaluation of his traditional mores'.[23]

As it is masculine power which dictates the forms of social evolution in Desai's early and middle novels, she comes in her later work to explore the public world of men and social politics. Here Desai uses her analysis of the individual's inner world and search for meaning in the context of historical and national change. In Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Clear Light of Day, Desai uses the year of Indian independence around which to orientate her depiction of personal lives, thereby creating a dialogue between the quest for individual identity and an

interrogation of the past. Desai's development of the resonance between the personal and the historical leads her, in one of her most recent works, In Custody, into the exclusively male world of 'achievement, action and experience' where women are rendered almost invisible.[24]

This significant thematic development in Desai's oeuvre - from the private to the public world, from what Desai sees as the introspective world of women to the historically and socially-defined world of men[25] - can best be conveyed by a brief comparison between Desai's first and most recent novel. Both novels deal with the themes of violence and marginality but, whereas in Cry The Peacock they are related from a purely psychological perspective (a woman's madness and her act of murder), in Baumgartner's Bombay they are placed squarely into a historical context through exploring the experiences of an 'enemy alien' in post-war India.

Women and Protest

Protest, in Desai's novels, takes a different form from that seen in the work of Markandaya and Sahgal. Whereas in the work of Markandaya and Sahgal we see the social basis of oppression, Desai's work embraces a form of protest that is committed to two things: portraying the

psychological effects of oppression and searching for a system of values that reaches beyond the social and political, beyond, as it were, the dialectics of power. Where Markandaya's work describes a quest for cultural synthesis and Sahgal's work describes a search for historical truths, Desai's work describes a metaphysical quest for individual growth and liberation.

The above developments are accompanied by a general shift in Desai's novels from a narrow focus on women's experience to an understanding that the substance of that experience - isolation, aimlessness and powerlessness - applies equally to men. This is not say that Desai loses sight of the specific oppressions suffered by women (she doesn't), but rather that in moving from the private to the public, from the woman's world to the man's world, the emphasis in her novels comes to be laid upon the fundamental violence done to the human spirit itself.

Notes and References

1. This is a phrase Desai used when I interviewed her on 27 May 1987.

2. Atma Ram, 'An Interview with Anita Desai', p. 96.

3. Eugene Lunn, Marxism and Modernism, pp. 34-37.

4. Ibid., p.44.

5. Ibid., p. 45.

6. Theodor Adorno et al Aesthetics and Politics, p. 160.

7. Lunn, p. 44.

8. From my interview with Desai cited above.

9.The other two stages are 'romanticism' and 'nihilism'. Camus, The Rebel, pp. 43-56.

10. Ibid., pp. 33-43 and p. 64.

11. Shanta Krishnaswamy, The Woman in Indian Fiction in English, p. 241.

12. Quoted in R. S. Sharma, Anita Desai, p. 12.

13. Yashodhara Dalmia, An Interview with Anita Desai, Times of India, 29.4.79.

14. Anita Desai, 'Indian Women Writers' in The Eye of the Beholder, ed. Maggie Butcher, p. 56.

15. In 1979 Desai claimed to be 'interested in characters who are not average but have retreated, or have been driven into some extremity of despair and so turned against, or made a stand against, the general current. It is easy to flow with the current ... But those who cannot follow it, whose heart cries out "the great No", who fight

the current and struggle against it, they know what the demands are and what it costs to meet them.' Yashodhara Dalmia, op. cit.

16. Peter Alcock has argued that in Desai's fiction 'we have the expression of...a uniquely Indian sensibility that is yet completely at ease in the mind of the West'. I would argue that there remains a fundamental cultural tension in her work. 'Rope, Serpent, Fire: Recent Fiction of Anita Desai', p. 33.

17. G. P. Sarma, Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Fiction, p. xi.

18. This is supported by Meena Shirwadkar's findings that 'the problem of identity ... crops up more in Indo-Anglian novels than in the Indian novels in regional languages'. Meena Shirwadkar, Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel, p. 150.

19. Meenakshi Mukherjee, 'The Theme of Displacement in Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya', p. 228.

20. Atma Ram, op. cit., p. 102.

21. V. Woolf, Women and Writing, p. 81.

22. Shyam A. Asnani, 'Anita Desai's Fiction: A New Dimension', p. 45.

23. J. G. Masilamani, 'Feminism in Anita Desai', p. 33.

24. Atma Ram, op. cit., p. 102.

25. This distinction is made by Desai herself in Atma Ram, 'Interview', ibid.

PROTEST AND IDENTITY

Cry The Peacock (1963): Madness and Identity

Anita Desai's first novel is as ambitious as it is raw. It explores the disintegration into madness of a woman who remembers a prophecy of death made to her by a soothsayer when she was just a child. Opening and closing with a short passage narrated in the third person,[1] the bulk of the novel is described from the perspective of the psychologically unhinged subject. The novel thus becomes a kaleidoscopic text which describes Maya's feverish state of mind through the vivid and sensory observation of objects and beings. The pervasive imagery of death, decay and bestiality, and the startling and disturbing flashbacks, powerfully convey the sense of brooding malevolence and claustrophobia which affect Maya. Although at times the linguistic structure of the sentences is clotted (see pp. 23 and 49), the bulk of the text is shot through with a fluent and imaginative use of language, which works to convey the primacy of the senses to Maya's experience.

The novel engages in the modernist preoccupations of subjectivity, formal fragmentation and temporal disjunction through addressing two distinct ideological outlooks.[2] These provide on the one hand a psychoanalytical, 'Freudian' understanding of Maya's illness, and on the other a philosophical and Hindu rationalisation of it. These perspectives involve Desai in a feminist challenge to the established order. But, as I will show in the following pages, whilst the former provides a means of interpreting Maya's illness through both psychoanalytic and social perspectives, the latter, by describing the cultural dimension to her protest, gives us an insight into specific aspects of Indian women's oppression.

I will first analyse the way the novel lends itself to a psychoanalytical reading, and in the process suggest some of the reasons why such a reading is not completely adequate to the demands of Indian feminist writing. In my second section I will interrogate Maya's mental breakdown from the Hindu perspective. I will argue that in pointedly drawing attention to the centrality of Brahmin teaching to Maya's perceptions, Desai herself creates a framework that invites a symptomatic reading of her text. In my conclusion I will describe what I believe are the particular qualities of Desai's emergent feminism.

Towards a Definition of Indian Literary Feminism

The Psychoanalytic Framework

Cry The Peacock opens with Maya contemplating the death of her dog, Toto.[3] This confrontation with death triggers a new sense of loss, isolation and foreboding. This leads her to seek refuge in childhood memories, and in turn reminds her of the long-forgotten prophecy which stated that after four years of marriage either she or her husband would die. Gradually Maya, who is consistently described as a 'child' in the novel, loses hold of reality, retreating more and more into her own world of sensory experience and hidden memories to the point where her connection with her husband becomes tenuous, and she begins to despise him. Desai skilfully draws the reader through Maya's demise, showing her move from an initial fear of death to an inner refusal to accept the fact that she may die soon, and, eventually, to her active rebellion against the dictates of the prophecy - a rebellion that culminates in the act of murder.

Desai explores Maya's alienation in such a way that it can easily be translated into psychoanalytic terms. Maya's madness can be interpreted as the natural outcome of a struggle with her identity - a result of a desire to return to a state of auto-erotic undifferentiation. Desai's portrayal of Maya's gradual alienation contains within it

many significant phases of personal conflict which according to psychoanalysts mark the growth towards identity. In this section I will analyse three aspects of this growth that play a key part in the novel: the depiction of Maya as a 'child'; Maya's fascination with the concept of her own death; and the use of the mirror in the novel to describe Maya's 'split self'.[4]

In Sexual/Textual Politics Toril Moi has shown that, in psychoanalytic terms, madness can be seen as the result of the desire to return to a 'pre-Oedipal' childhood state in which the senses are unified, and the self is at one with the Other.[5] (In Freudian terminology this is the state of the pleasure principle, and in Lacanian terms that of the Imaginary.) In her novel Desai explores Maya's regressive desire 'to return to [her] old home ... and live the life that should not, could not ever end' (p. 178) by showing how the adult Maya's childishness takes three principal forms: her childlike relationship with her indulgent husband Gautama (which is related directly by Gautama himself in Freudian terms as 'a very obvious father-obsession' (p. 146)); her experience of the world which is, like that of a child's, sensory and animistic rather than rational; and her childlike absorption in her equally childish appearance.[6] All these elements come together in a passage in which Maya is shown to

contemplate her reflection, and in which the alienating results of her sensuous self-absorption become evident:

> The silence descended upon me again now, and while I held my soul, still burning in my hands, I saw my body detach itself from it and float away, to rest upon the mirror where I could gaze upon it from a cool distance. I studied it, absorbed; the round, childish, face, pretty, plump and pampered, its smooth, silken skin with one, small velvet mole; the small shell-like ears ... the silly collection of curls, flower pinned to them - a pink flower, a child's choice of posy. (p. 105)

Desai does not merely describe some of the constituents of madness but also places them in a specific ideological framework through Gautama, who is the logician in the novel. He clearly translates Maya's experience into psychoanalytical terms, and prophetically describes the fatal consequences of her 'father-obsession', stating that 'It is a complex that unless you mature rapidly, you will not be able...to destroy. But then, it will probably destroy itself in the end, since passion of this sort is almost always self-consuming.' (p. 146). It seems that the logic of Moi's observations is amply borne out in the text.

Maya's fascination with the concept of her own death is another aspect of this desire to regain a lost unity. Death is tied to sexual love in the novel, particularly

through the symbol of the peacock's cry, which Maya associates with the soothsayer's words:

> 'Do you not hear the peacocks call in the wilds? Are they not blood-chilling, their shrieks of pain? 'Pia, pia', they cry. 'Lover, lover. Mio, mio, - I die, I die.' ...Have you seen peacocks make love, child? Before they mate, they fight. They will rip each other's breasts to strips and fall, bleeding, with their beaks open and panting. When they have exhausted them selves in battle, they will mate. Peacocks are wise. The hundred eyes upon their tails have seen the truth of life and death, and know them to be one. Living, they are aware of death. Dying they are in love with life. 'Lover, lover,' you will hear them cry in the forests, when the rain-clouds come, 'Lover, I die' ... ' (pp. 95-96)

This passage is an eloquent example of the Freudian view that death represents 'the ultimate object of desire...or the recapturing of the lost unity, the final healing of the split subject'.[7]

The mirror is a significant imago of madness in the novel. It is also a metaphor in psychoanalysis for a particular stage in the development of the unconscious. Lacan has argued that entry into the Symbolic order of the patriarchy (when the individual's sense of autonomous identity begins to be formed) is prefigured by the 'mirror stage' in which the baby is endowed with 'a unitary body image', feeling itself at one with the outside world - in particular with its mother. This stage is transcended when 'the father intervenes to break up

the dyadic unity between mother and child, in order that the child can take up its place in the Symbolic Order.[8]

In Desai's novel this 'mirror stage' is vividly described as part of Maya's search for a lost unity. It is no coincidence that some of Maya's most intense experiences of anger take place as she views herself before 'the mirror, always the mirror!' (p. 104). A psychoanalytical, feminist interpretation of these scenes might place them as examples of her rejection of an autonomous identity within the patriarchal order.[9] This argument would be validated by Desai's description of the scene in which Maya, on hearing Gautama's Freudian rationalisation of her 'father-obsession', strikes out at his reflection in the mirror - that male image which breaks her sense of unity - and in so expressing her rage returns to a world of madness and death:

> But here, since no lightning bolt would fall, no thunderclap break on this bleak, comfortless figure, I broke a storm loose myself, by striking out at his absurd reflection in the tall mirror, with such force, with such unconsidered force, that the great oblong of the mercurial cage went swinging backwards and upwards, bearing with it a heap of half-filled bottles of perfume, and the world was tilted upside down, insanely, unnaturally, so that our faces appeared bloated, as though they were the faces of corpses floating in a grey sea ... (p. 146)

Another key example of Maya's rage at this intrusion, or break of unity, by her substitute father takes place when Gautama interrupts her sense of communion with the pure 'vast, mother love' of the moon (p. 208) - an interruption which leads her to kill him:

> And then Gautama made a mistake - his last, decisive one. In talking, gesturing, he moved in front of me, thus coming between me and the worshipped moon, his figure an ugly, crooked shadow ... (p. 208)

In both cases Maya is shown to have her desire for unity shattered by the male figure who is identified with her father. The absence of a maternal presence in this novel (we are told that Maya's mother had died as a child), can perhaps be explained by the fact that Maya is searching for that part of herself which is lost.[10]

The novel is thus not only encoded with psychoanalytical metaphors and meanings: it also reveals and reviles the oppressive nature of patriarchy. Juliet Mitchell and others have shown how entry into the patriarchy or 'the law of the father' is a necessary precondition in Freud's study of the development of the psyche.[11] Through describing Maya's madness Desai repeatedly challenges the system within which Freud operates in the very act of using it. Maya's regression into the realm of madness, childhood and inevitable death

can be seen as a form of resistance to the hegemony of closed structures and the established order. In the segregated world of Desai's early heroines, where women are shown to occupy the private sphere of emotion and sensation, this is probably the only form of protest allowed.

Yet this psychoanalytical reading is culturally specific, constituting an attack on the 'notion of the unitary self' which, as Moi has shown, is 'the central concept of Western male humanism'.[12] Seen from an Indian perspective Maya's madness takes on a new aspect, and the novel itself provides a culturally-specific framework to her breakdown. An analysis of this framework - the Hindu/Buddhist system of thought - provides an alternative to the Eurocentric reading which focuses on what Bell Hooks has argued are 'western' preoccupations with individual identity and the effects of exclusion.[13]

Challenging Fate: Protest in the Cultural Context

Maya's madness can be set into a specifically Indian conceptual framework. The breakdown in her reason can be seen to result from a failed attempt to challenge a theologically-inscribed order. Hindu teaching is expounded in the novel by the three key male characters - the

soothsayer, Maya's father, and Gautama. Each of them describe a form of Hindu teaching or attitude which Maya challenges and appears to reject.

The soothsayer makes a science of the unknown. His prediction of death after four years of marriage is based upon reading both Maya's horoscope and a mark on her forehead. Certain that 'the stars do not lie' (p. 29), he says that death can only be averted through religious worship, obedience and 'sacrifices' (p. 31). Desai shows clearly that his doctrine is derived from an unrationalised, though nevertheless potent, mixture of cultural awareness, religious understanding and personal intuition: 'the entire encounter ended in tales of mythology, in some philosophy, much contorted even to my infantile ears, in prayers and songs, religious songs, till the sticky net of his shadow at last slipped away and released me ' (p. 32). Further, Desai imbues this form of teaching with overtones of male domination, showing how the soothsayer is sexually threatening to Maya - he is described as a reptilian albino who constantly flicks the meagre loincloth lewdly about his legs - and how she has nightmares about being raped by him (p. 127).

In Maya's father Hindu thought and culture take a different form. A man of refined tastes and restrained

manners - 'formal as a Moghul garden, gracious and exact' (p. 45) - he nevertheless reinforces the fatalistic perspective of the soothsayer: 'if he saw disaster he saw it as being inevitable, and if he saw rebellion he saw it as being hopeless' (p. 54). His reaction to the prophecy is counterproductive - by banishing mention of it he works on a principle of exclusion that reinforces its power by making it part of Maya's subconscious. An orthodox Brahmin by birth, his disposal of Maya's horoscope describes not a rejection of its contents nor of its truth, but a refusal to confront it at all. Later in the novel when Maya tries to find some consolation in the thought that her father might have helped her in fighting her fate, she comes to the painful realisation that he 'would have done nothing to allay my fear or dispel my conviction, but merely underlined their power by asking me, however sadly, to accept, "for it must be so" '(p. 53). Both the soothsayer and her father subscribe to a belief in predetermination that Maya finds impossible to accept.

Gautama on the other hand is the potential healer in the novel. A man of clinical precision in both thought and action, he is also 'no Brahmin and no traditionalist' (p. 75), and is scornful of blind faith and idolatry. He instead believes in the philosophy of the Gita, which is also shown to constitute a fundamental part of Maya's

reading (see p. 108). He quotes liberally from the Gita, affirming, in a long discussion with Maya in the very middle of the novel, the importance of detachment from sense objects and of finding a vocation (pp. 111-125). Maya is drawn to the hope contained by these messages but, in a significant twist in the dialogue, Desai shows how Maya comes to reinvest Gautama's understanding of the Gita with a conception of fatalism that she rebels against.

This is, significantly, shown to result from Maya's own interpretation of what her husband says. Gautama quite clearly makes a distinction between the mere 'fatalism' of those who believe that the individual is tethered to a cycle over which s/he has no control (p. 122), and the Hindu/Buddhist conception of karma (or causality) which places the individual as an active force in determining the future: 'the perfect logic of it: one incarnation acting upon the other, the action performed in one incarnation bearing fruit in the next, as surely as autumn must follow summer ...' (p. 122). Maya however interprets karma as a rationalisation of predetermination and sees the prophecy as a form of 'punishment' (p. 124). Thus Gautama, who is her one potential support, becomes another male antagonist. Indeed his contrasting perspective of the world, based upon mental discipline and calm, challenges

her priorities of 'the vivid, explosive, mobile life' (p. 92) and her sense of identity.

What Maya rejects is not only the necessary acceptance of one's fate that all three men appear to propound, but the challenge to her system of values which privileges the world of the senses over the world of the intellect. Whilst the first rejection describes in a very real sense an act of physical self-preservation, the second can be seen as a desire to preserve her identity. Her sensuous engagement with the immediate, physical world, her involvement with feeling and 'tensions and perpetual thrill' (p. 152), and her vivid imagination are all essential parts of her character. Yet they also reveal a self-absorption which is disparaged both by Gautama, who Desai has told me exemplifies 'the male withdrawal from any analysis of the female character',[14] and the tenets of the Gita, a verse of which the novel quotes: '"When he completely withdraws his senses from sense objects as the tortoise withdraws its limbs, then wisdom becomes well-established "' (p. 109).

Yet the Hindu/Buddhist logic pervades the novel. The very names of the principal characters contain a religious resonance that Desai openly affirms. Gautama shares not merely the name but the very attributes of the Buddha:

detached and calm, he is described as 'look[ing] very much the meditator beneath the bo tree' (p. 113). Maya's name, on the other hand, connotes a historical figure, a particular perspective, and a creative principle. Maya is the name of the Buddha's mother, the name describing an illusory state of mind which impedes clear judgement, and in vedic terms constitutes what J.L. Brockington calls 'creative power'.[15]

The latter two meanings of Maya (or māyā as it spelled in the religious context) are the most significant. The first describes a 'self-centred' state of mind which has a peculiar power: 'by the power of māyā objects which owe their existence to consciousness appear independent of it'.[16] The latter, older, meaning of the world describes an essential life-force. Both meanings find expression in the character of Maya, who is youthful, self-centred, and has a sensual engagement in the life around her to the point where she feels she is at one with the objects she observes.[17] And both meanings are played out in the narrative structure which relates Maya's collapse into madness - a state of mind that Foucault has described as one that 'brings illusion to its climax'[18] - to her corresponding assertion of life. Maya thus is not only a character whose life is threatened but a symbol of a threatened perspective. This is made clear in the passage

where she contemplates the meaning of her name: 'Only a dream. An illusion. Maya - my very name means nothing, is nothing but an illusion' (p. 172). The threat to Maya's existence comes not only from the prophecy but also from a religious doctrine which disparages her perspective - a perspective which lies so far outside accepted religious codes that it is labelled as 'occidental' by Gautama (p. 121).

Placing the novel within its cultural context makes it possible to see that Maya's madness is not merely the result of a basic death-wish or desire for unity, but also the result of her desire for self-preservation and an assertion of her identity. Whilst a Eurocentric feminist reading may well privilege a psychoanalytic interpretation of the text, such a reading would deny the complex operation of the theologically-inscribed systems of power against which Maya is operating. Maya's murder of her husband is an undeniable affirmation of her will to live, since according to the logic of the prophecy (which states that either she or her husband will die), in killing him she is preserving herself. It takes place after she observes two significant things: the figure of a dancing shiva and the moon in the night sky. Both give her a sense of fulfilment. The figure of Shiva, his foot 'raised into a symbol of liberation' (p. 203), is shown to be a symbol

of the principle of creation which Maya perceives to be active. Her observation of it is important because, as Brockington has shown in his study of a early Hinduism, 'māyā means not the total unreality of the world, but its erroneous isolation from Siva'.[19] At one with the figure of regeneration, Maya then gets a sense of psychic wholeness and purity in observing the virginal-motherly moon.[20] In killing him she is, in an integrated frame of mind, affirming the significance of her life, her system of values, and taking control of her destiny .

Perhaps the strongest testimony to the power of Brahmin teaching in the novel is evident in the way it subscribes to the logic of fatalism without even so much as a polemical commentary. This logic is affirmed through narrative emplotment (Maya's mental death through madness and her physical death through accident), through symbolism (the figure of the dancing Shiva which represents the cycle of regeneration and which Maya observes before Gautama's death) and through ideological debate (quotations from the Gita which preach the importance of acceptance). Indeed the Gita, which is historically significant as the work from which Mahatma Gandhi repeatedly quoted in his quest for a national identity, puts into a philosophical context Maya's gradual alienation by describing the movement from

attachment to longing to delusion to loss of memory and discrimination to final death (p. 112).

The novel thus attacks patriarchal oppression while at the same time affirming its invincibility. The determinates of Maya's oppression are clear - the canon of male thinking structured around the fixed poles of an ideology that embraces paternalism (evident in both Maya's father and Gautama), the belief in detachment (seen in Gautama) and Hindu fatalism (embodied by the soothsayer) which works from a belief in the need to uphold the status quo. Maya interprets this ideology as one that prescribes fatalism, and which thereby literally spells death for her.

Since it is an invisible form of power that Maya contends against - one that operates in the realm of ideas - it is appropriate that the arena of conflict is the equally invisible one of the psyche. One critic has, quite rightly, shown how Desai's feminism is intimately linked with her open-ended exploration of the human imagination:

> This is good 'feminist' writing because while it remains faithful to the woman's point of view (that is to say Desai does not manipulate her material in any interests whatsoever) it is unpolemical and thus matches the harsh and impersonal nature of the imagination.[21]

Whilst it could be argued that by abstracting Maya's protest onto the level of metaphor - her psychological retreat from 'fate' results in 'madness' - Desai has buried the social basis of women's oppression, it would be more true to say that this novel reveals the psychological effects of exclusion and patriarchal control; a reading that Desai herself favours.[22] Furthermore, the novel's strength lies in its ability to escape from ideological closure and shows how Desai's feminism is of a particular order. It is based upon her easy transference of meaning from one epistomological realm to another - from the closed systems of western Freudian analysis and Hindu/Buddhist determinism to the fluid realm of the individual imagination. It is through the transgression of boundaries that Maya's retreat into insanity can be seen as a rise to power: from a position of dependence upon Gautama she comes to feel superior to him. Maya's state relativises categories of analysis so that the reader is invited to question the closed system upon which the patriarchal order is based. Cry The Peacock opens up these systems showing that 'family, tradition, custom [and] superstition' (p. 61) are all instruments of a tyrannical order that have a dubious claim to any rational foundation.

Voices in the City (1965): Male Escape and Female Sacrifice

In her second novel Desai uses the depiction of the transforming power of the individual imagination to very different purposes. Unlike Cry The Peacock, which is clearly a psychological novel describing the inner world of a single, isolated individual, Voices in the City draws upon an analysis of an urban social context, and explores the material dimensions of the experience of several characters. What's more, the imagination of the characters in this novel is pinned to a specific interpretative system - that of Hindu myth - so that far from transcending the limitations of ideological systems, the imagination is shown to be in their service.

This is not to say that Desai refuses to challenge this ideological system. Indeed the central tension in the novel derives from the ironic conflict between the imaginative hold of a myth of an all-powerful female deity and the reality of women's experience, between the depiction of what the sociologists Liddle and Joshi have described as 'India's matriarchal myth' of the goddess Kali, which the novel shows as the principle of interpretation and resolution of meaning, and the

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depiction of individual women's 'voices', which are socially and materially grounded, and lie outside this abstracting epistemological realm.[23]

The novel describes the attempts of three siblings - Nirode, Monisha and Amla - to find an identity in the city of Calcutta, which derives its name from the goddess Kali. Away from their home and their dominating mother, they all experience a sense of alienation and fragmentation, and share a common need to express themselves, to communicate and to find an identity. In Nirode this takes the form of a rejection of his mother and an attempt to found a successful literary journal, 'Voice'. In Monisha it takes the form of a desire to protect her individuality within the stronghold of the joint family by expressing herself in her private diary. Amla, like Nirode, feels distanced from her mother and has a desire to find satisfaction in her career as a commercial artist and in the social world. Only Nirode, the one man of the three, achieves his aims. Whilst Monisha's loss of identity forces her to resort to suicide, and Amla finds that she is forced to compromise and lose something of herself in the process, Nirode experiences, in the final pages of the novel, a spiritual reconciliation with the city and his mother, seeing in both the embodiment of the goddess Kali - the bloodthirsty goddess of death and destruction.

In the following pages I first analyse Desai's depiction of social contradiction and her reinscription of this into a mythical framework. In my second section I show how this reinscription is not complete in the case of women. Whilst their voices of dissent and rebellious actions are written into the metaphor of myth (a key example is the way in which Monisha's suicide is seen as a sacrifice to the goddess Kali), their experience is not one of reconciliation but of continued conflict. The sisters are shown to be denied the experience of metaphysical resolution granted to Nirode, and to remain the victims of society. I argue that Voices in the City is not only a further example of the pessimism inherent in Desai's feminist protest, but also, through describing the contrasting actions of Monisha and Amla, enacts the only two possibilities that Desai believes Indian women have open to them - that they either 'accept or die'.

Myth in the City

Voices in the City is Desai's most explicitly social novel,[24] and in it she explores the problem of communication. The isolated individual is presented as the spokesperson for the whole of India in his/her desire to find a suitable means of communicating in a common language, and thus unifying a divided country. Written in

the '60's, when conflicts over linguistic autonomy - commonly known as the 'language riots' - were renewed, the novel would appear (perhaps unusually for a work by Desai) to be socially and politically in dialogue with its time. Desai uses two socio-literary registers, communication and the city, which are also both modernist preoccupations,[25] through which to explore her concern with individual and national identity.

Desai's exploration of identity in the city and of the desire for communication is at first materially grounded. Yet this material basis is progressively eroded in two keys ways: first by separating communication, which as Volosinov has shown can only be understood as a social phenomenon,[26] from its social basis and as though it can be understood in terms of the individual alone, and secondly by equating the city with the mother. As R. S. Sharma has shown the key characters' 'lives are shaped by their mother in the unconscious and...discern the unconscious influence in their foster mother - Calcutta city'.[27] The city, initially described in concrete, material terms as an amalgam of rich and poor, and as a site of class conflict and uncompromising materialism, is thus dematerialised into a metaphor of both motherhood and death.

I should like to begin by studying the way in which communication is presented in the novel. From the first, communication is shown to be a site of conflict and a source of tension. Desai reveals both the plasticity and materiality of language by showing, in onomatopoeic terms, how it can be used to construct lies. Nirode feigns respectability by 'calling himself a journalist' (p. 8) though his real work consisted in 'not writing, not reporting - but sticking cut-outs into scrap-books' (p. 14). The fragmentation of language (evident here in the hyphenated, staccato diction) is mirrored in the presentation of other such city-dwellers like Bose, who calls himself a Professor but isn't, and whose job it is to 'put the commas where he was supposed to put in the commas, and used the exclamation mark with discretion' (p. 13).

Signs are shown to fail to signify for those working with words, and seem symptomatic of the outer chaos of the city. This concern with language, based on a modernist preoccupation with linguistic ambiguity, self-reflexivity, and urban disintegration, is articulated as a bourgeois preoccupation. Nirode, reflecting on the aims of his journal Voice, argues for the necessity of creating a discursive medium which will unite disparate intellectuals:

> How to bring this scattering of disparate intellectuals together? How to bring them to life? From their separate communities, from behind the walls of their communal languages - how to bring them together and bring them to life so that they can begin to do their bit of roaring and rampaging in a country that's been asleep too long? (p. 24)

Here Nirode uses a nationalist rhetoric to voice a class-confined concern. His aim is not to bridge class-barriers - as one might have been led to expect with his rejection of capitalism and an assumption of poverty - but rather to broaden and strengthen the mental acumen, and power potential, of a self-selected group. Voice turns out to be an aesthetic exercise conducted, it appears, only in English, and is most successful when it panders to Eurocentric sentiment. Couched in revolutionary terms, Nirode's purpose supports a paternalistic belief in the rights of an intellectual élite.

In believing that he is articulating a radical concept with far-reaching social implications, Nirode reveals his own self-delusion: he is in fact trapped in the bourgeois outlook he professes to reject. The two things which he detests most - the dehumanisation of the verbal medium, and materialism - are key features of a capitalist society that commercialises and mechanises human exchange, and of the journalist's profession to which he belongs. Nirode's

displaced conservatism forces him to posit solipsism as the sole alternative to increasing dehumanisation:

> The newspaper carries the writer further and further into the impersonal, it only follows the You. The You is everything in news. There is never an I. It is the I that interests me now. (p. 32)

Nirode later rejects the entire social domain because of the ubiquity of commercial enterprise and financial obligations, and the above passage anticipates, and socially sanctions, the collapse into psychological terms of the representation of communication.

This withdrawal into the private world of the self is paralleled in the second and third sections of the novel, when Monisha and Amla are each shown to retreat into self-indulgent emotionalism in reaction to the oppressive demands of their material environment. Monisha observes that there are two sides to Calcutta - 'one rapacious, one weary' - and describes the consumerism of the city in terms that echo Nirode's distaste:

> There are no ethics in these houses of trade, any more than there is anything aesthetic in the little plaster idols. Ethics are shunned, all is shunned except the swelling and fattening of mortal, male flesh. (p. 117)

Similarly Amla's withdrawal into the seclusion of Dharma's retreat outside Calcutta and her lapse into a dream-world of romance, are shown to arise from a dissatisfaction with her associates and her job as a commercial artist:

> It seemed to her that Mrs Basu was a queen of unscrupulous commerce, that her clients were sharks and liars, that the round of babies she drew got no benefit whatsoever from the gripe water she was advertising, that she was involved in a shady and unconscientious organisation, business and art. (pp. 174-75)

Both women find fulfilment in forms of communication that are self-directed. Monisha retreats into the realm of music; Amla into that of painting. Desai has subtly shifted her emphasis from dialogue to self-expression, from communication to art.

Yet there is a significant difference between the withdrawal that the sisters are shown to make and Nirode's self-imposed seclusion. The girls are shown to have their seclusion thrust upon them - Monisha is forced into isolation, and Amla has no control over the emotions that attract her to Dharma - and find no lasting fulfilment in their isolation. The presentation of the sisters' experience, whilst complementing Nirode's, also serves as a deviation from the theme of metaphysical resolution of social contradictions, and I shall return to this point

later on. For the moment I wish to explore how the main theme of satisfaction through the isolated world of the self is developed in the novel.

Whilst stressing the mechanistic arbitrariness of verbal communication in consumer society, Desai repeatedly affirms the value of a deeper reality in the first part of the novel. The city of Calcutta is no mere chaos but embodies two aspects of death - its soothing aspect and its terrifying aspect. Both of them are evocatively described early in the novel when Nirode visits Sonny's house. Sonny, whose dogs call to mind the guardian dogs in the land of the Dead, is also the living exemplar of a decaying and decadent order. Here is how Nirode's visit to Sonny's house is described:

> On the one side of the road the old cemetery slept in white stained peace and with reassuring silence. On the other a big house loomed, dark and uneasy, as though of those who slept there, all slept badly. Here and there a window gave out a glimpse of light, but did nothing to illuminate the house which was more suggestive than the cemetery, of bats, graves, and bones. (p. 12)

Later in the novel these two aspects of death are again juxtaposed but this time they are shown to be contained within a description of the city itself:

> Calcutta was not merely the bazaars ringed by cinemas, slaughter-houses and pan booths, but also

> the history of those old Georgian houses that lined still, gaslit streets ... The city was as much atmosphere as odour, as much a haunting ghost of the past as a frenzied passage towards early death. (p. 42)

Nirode's problem is thus not only presented as being one of integrating himself within the city but also of reconciling these two aspects of death which the city embodies. Furthermore, this realm of myth can, as Cristopher Nash has pointed out, only be understood hermeneutically and not analytically.[28] The novel thus removes itself further from a socially-grounded problematic and a socially-realisable resolution.

Nirode's main problem is presented as the need to enter the realm of the mythical consciousness by accepting the life/death dichotomy embodied in the goddess Kali and the city of Calcutta that is her home. He sees marriage as 'destructive, negative, decadent' comprising of 'bodies, touch and torture' which is reflected in 'the dark of Calcutta, its warmth that clung to one with a moist perspiring embrace, rich with the odours of open gutters and tuberose garlands' (p. 35). His prudish disgust bears something of his Oedipal jealousy and fascination with Mother's sexuality (see pp. 37, 64 and 190), and supports the view put forward by the novel that what is required is that he accept whole-heartedly 'a myth that bore a

constant relationship to a reality he had, for some reason, rejected and for no reason loved' (p. 52). It is shown that the religiously-conceived mythic understanding (which the novel posits as the only solution to the socially-based problems Nirode experiences) is concomitant with his acceptance of both his 'succubus' mother (p. 37) and the 'devil city' (p. 117) which was 'constantly in the throes of destruction and rebirth' (p. 53). By the end of Part 1 Desai has successfully dismantled the materialist paradigm that appeared to be the frame of reference from which Nirode voiced his dilemma, and has paved the way for presenting the resolution of the novel in metaphysical terms.

This resolution takes the form of spiritual insight and acceptance, by Nirode, of the connection between death and love, between the city and his mother: '"She is Kali", Nirode affirms at the end of the novel, "...she is everything we have been fighting against...and she is also everything we have been fighting for. She is our consciousness and our unconsciousness, she is all that is manifest and all that is unmanifest..."' (pp. 255 and 256). Mother, who has remained something of a mystery figure throughout the novel, described only through the reflections of her estranged children and fragments of her

letters, is here presented as the personification of a mythical archetype, an imaginative construct.

Significantly, Amla quietly disagrees with Nirode's views: '"[She is] mother," Amla groaned. "... that is all "' (p. 256). Like the other key women described in the novel, Monisha and Aunt Lila, Amla's voice is shown resisting the process of aesthetic resolution of conflict even as it is being written into it. It is to Desai's credit that whilst enforcing a unity in the text through mythologisation, she is able to present the hegemonic structures that work to maintain that unity. Women's experience of fragmentation though written into the metaphysical framework is shown to be effectively unresolved.

Women in the City

Desai shows Nirode and his two sisters all suffering from some form of social pressure. Therefore it may appear at first that the position of men and women in the city are very similar. Yet Desai makes subtle distinctions between the experience of men and women. For example she shows differences between Nirode's voluntary renunciation and the enforced sacrifice made by his older sisters. Compare the following passage which shows Nirode

as the 'victim of circumstance' with one describing Monisha's private thoughts on the lot of women in Calcutta:

> The freedom of impulse was taken from him by these people who forced on him an idealism to which they themselves lacked the courage or opportunity to conform. Be true, they pleaded, be alone. Starve, but do not resign. (p. 71) [my emphasis]

> ... I think of generations of Bengali women hidden behind the barred windows of half-dark rooms, spending centuries in washing clothes, kneading dough and murmuring aloud verses form the Bhagvad-Gita and the Ramayana, in the dim light of sooty lamps. Lives spent waiting for nothing, waiting on men self-centred and indifferent and hungry and demanding and critical, waiting for death and dying misunderstood, always behind bars, those terrifying black bars that shut us in, in the old houses, in the old city. (p. 120)

The difference between fulfilling the demands of a noble task and a thankless one is delicately demarcated by Desai, and it is significant that the definition of a social context is strengthened in Monisha's journal: the joint family, a microcosm of the city in containing the oppressive constraints of imprisonment within the mass, is also entirely different from the city in embodying the peculiar constraints of patriarchal tradition and the observance of a division of labour in the context of urban and social change and reform (see p. 110). In contrast to Nirode's existential despair, Monisha's experience, as will be seen, is described in vividly concrete terms, and

serves as one that counters his metaphysical resolution of social conflict.

Monisha is presented as an imaginative, highly literate and creative woman who has been forced by her parents into marrying into an unimaginative, conservative family in order to contain her 'morbid inclinations' (p. 198). She is unable to resolve the contradictions between her private and her public self, and eventually loses her identity when she withdraws from social contact, finally killing herself. Her experience of language in the joint family as a 'mindless, meaningless monotony of sound' (p. 110) is such that she admits in her diary 'it has become my own language' (p. 113). There is directness and poignancy in her first-person narrative, which voices protest by revealing the enforced subservience faced by a new daughter-in-law to the 'many-headed' idol of the joint family (p. 109).

Indeed it is by describing the joint family as a deity and exposing its crushing impact upon a creative woman that Desai appears to challenge the very 'idolatry' of Nirode which concludes the novel. The joint family, which enforces the learning of the ancient language of Sanskrit on a schoolboy so that he produces the monotonous drone which Monisha can't bear (see p. 112),

also enforces traditional roles upon its women, and is described in the novel as an changeless, immutable and claustrophobic social structure. It is a fortress of tradition with 'tiered balconies - four tiers of them..., shutting out light and enclosing shadows like stagnant well water' (p. 109). It is also an institution which is shown to extract honour from women such as Monisha who has to touch, and massage, the feet of her elders - 'Feet before faces here' (p. 109) - and who, in attempting to preserve her sense of self-worth, comes to be a divided figure:

> I tell myself: She thinks I am touching her. She thinks I am touching her feet. But I am not. I do not touch her, nor does she touch me - there is this darkness in between. They will never reach through it to me. (p. 139)

Yet these attempts at self-preservation, to preserve 'an awake condition of the conscience' (p. 136), are shown to be futile as, restricted from access to the outside world, Monisha loses her sense of identity, and feels herself reduced into a passive observer:

> I am turned into a woman who keeps a diary. I do not like a woman who keeps a diary.
> Traceless, meaningless, uninvolved - does this not amount to non-existence, please? (p. 140)

Yet it is not only the joint family which exacts so much from women. Amla's infatuation with Dharma, who, as one critic has pointed out, is the 'ideal artist who does not escape from society but who creates his own world of "animated nature to which to escape"'[29] is doomed, not because they belong to different worlds (he to the world of self-cultivation and the painting of still life, and she to the public world of activity and commerce), but because she discovers in him the very conventionality of outlook and adherence to tradition that she was trying to escape from. She had thought him an artist who worked upon intuition, and found him a narrow-minded man who could not bear the 'disgrace' his daughter bore him in falling in love with a youth he did not approve of (p. 228). True to his name ('dharma' is a Sanskrit term which means not only religious tradition but also, as Brockington has shown, 'social mores and the requirements of the law'),[30] Dharma is a man who adheres strictly, and self-righteously, to social codes. Amla's experience serves to show that no escape is possible, for even her retreat from the city into the world of romance is punctured by the religiously inscribed social codes found within the urban joint family.

Desai shows that both Monisha and Amla experience psychological fragmentation in a profoundly different way

from their brother. Whilst Nirode's experience is described as an existential dilemma, the women's experience of fragmentation is presented in the physically concrete terms of anatomical dissection. It is no mere coincidence that Monisha and Amla, in completely different contexts, are shown to suffer the same experience:

> Like a burst of wild feathers, released full in my face, comes the realization that they are talking of me, my organs, the reasons I cannot have a child. I can't leave these vegetables I am cutting up for them - that would create a disturbance - but I stop listening, and regard my insides: my ovaries, my tubes, all my recesses moist with blood, laid open, laid bare to their scrutiny. (Monisha, p. 113)

> She reached forward for the sketches eagerly, but when she saw her small sections hopelessly scattered through many pages, scarred with harsh charcoal or dissected into even finer sections with pen or ink or pencil, she shuddered and dropped them ... It was too unsettling to be vivisected in this fashion. She felt again as though she were lying on a white slab in a morgue, beneath Dharma's scientific fingers, not to be anaesthetized but to be cut open and taken apart. (Amla, p. 203)

Such a bold description of raw physical pain (with the implicit correlation with sexual violation) is one that Desai reserves for her delineation of women's experience. It stands in stark contrast to the abstract, ideological basis of Nirode's protest.

Both women also have key experiences which indicate the path each is going to choose. Monisha, who compares the Bleeding Heart Doves at the zoo 'who live, eat, work sing, bleeding through life' with those 'silent Bengali women' who live waiting for a death in which 'there is no dignity,... but only a little melancholy as in the settling of a puff of dust upon the earth' (p. 121), would rather die than live incompletely. Amla also faces a stark choice but resolves to live. Her confrontation with the messengers of death - the birds on the race-course (p. 234) - is one that describes a fundamental split between the mythic and materialist worlds, a split that she is going to have to accept. The crowds do not see the horse that has stumbled and been shot - they are too absorbed in the winning of bets. The episode presages the symbolic split in Amla's perspective when, after Monisha's death, she is forced to choose between the world of the 'free instincts' (embodied by the horses, see p. 233) and the commercial world. The horse's death brings with it 'a vision of disaster', thus boding ill for Amla's acceptance of the social world. The description of this acceptance is presented in terms of a necessary failure; her acquiescence as a forced, but inevitable, weakness:

> And all the while, at the back of a mind that could not grapple directly with the powerful thing at hand, she knew that Monisha's death had pointed the way for her and would never allow her to lose herself. She knew she would go through life with her feet primly

> shod, involving herself with her drawings and safe people like Bose, precisely because Monisha had given a glimpse of what lay on the other side of this stark uncompromising margin. Yet she was unable that night, to think of the path or the jungle, of compromise or isolation, and watched bleakly, mindlessly, the white curtain in the doorway slowly blowing into the still room, then slowly drifting out again. (p. 248)

Desai's use of the metaphor of death and of the myth of Kali operates on two levels: on the one hand it is used to absorb and neutralise the protest of the women, and on the other to structure a metaphysical principle which has a particular reality for the women in Desai's novels - that death is the only alternative to compromise, and the only choice for women is to Accept or Die.[31] The former is evident when Nirode reinterprets Monisha's death as a sacrifice to the goddess Kali, and presents her suicide in these terms by drawing an analogy between the mouth of the kerosine container, the instrument of Death, and the blood-thirsty goddess's throat. Yet Monisha's realisation in the end that 'it was not what she wanted' (p. 242) points to a different truth - that women are not religious martyrs but social victims. Given this truth, why does Desai collapse her depiction of women's suffering - a suffering which is shown within a social context - onto a metaphysical realm? I shall examine this paradox in my next section.

'Accept or Die': Passivity in an Existential Perspective

Desai has confessed to a self-sanctioned social blindness - one that privileges the world of '"thought emotion and sensation"' and shuns 'the more common type of talent for social observation and human documentation'.[32] She has said that for her literature is '"more interesting, more significant and overwhelming than the real world"',[33] describing a romantic conception of the artist as a socially-removed individual who is privileged with an insight into 'universal' truths that transcend material reality. Myth is a particularly accessible aesthetic form for such writers for, as Nash points out, it 'justifies the role of the artist himself'.[34] It also offers an aesthetic escape from nagging social contradictions.

Voices in the City has, as R. S. Sharma points out, 'an overwhelming sense of unity'.[35] But such unity is gained at the expense of marginalising women's protest. It is because Desai's priority is the individual - irrespective of gender - that the emphasis in this novel is fluid, and fluctuates. Sharma, revealing Desai's paradoxical interest in isolation within the city, posits that 'the barren and destructive nature of human relationships in the city is fully manifest in the death of Monisha, who

does not have any illusion of being active or involved'.[36] Desai's detailed description of the social basis of Monisha's oppression - her depiction of domestic drudgery within the joint family for example (which closely parallels with the findings of anthropologists with regard to the treatment of daughters-in-law)[37] - is however circumscribed and integrated into a particular aesthetic vision and ideology. It is an ideology described by Raymond Williams in the following terms:

> In and through the intense subjectivities [of the collective unconscious] a metaphysical or psychological community is assumed, and characteristically ... it is universal; the middle terms of actual societies are excluded as ephemeral, superficial, or at best contingent and secondary. Thus the loss of social recognition and consciousness is in a way made into a virtue: as a condition of understanding and insight. A direct connection is then forged between intense subjectivity and a timeless reality: one is a means to the other and alternative terms are no more than distractions. The historically variable problem of 'the individual and society' acquires a sharp and particular definition, in that 'society' becomes an abstraction, and the collective flows only through the most inward channels. Not only the ordinary experience of apparent isolation, but a whole range of techniques of self-isolation, are then gathered to sustain the paradoxical experience of an ultimate collectivity which is beyond and above community.[38]

Desai's trans-historical perspective is ultimately a negative one for, in eternalising the present and advocating a belief in transcendent universal laws, she immobilises the individual's capacity to change herself

and her environment. Williams goes on to describe just such a conservatism as a precondition to the mythologisation of the city:

> Out of the cities...came these two great and transforming ideas: myth, in its variable forms; revolution, in its variable forms. Each, under pressure, offers to convert the other to its own terms. But they are better seen as alternative responses, for in a thousand cities, if in confused forms, they are in sharp, direct and necessary conflict.[39]

Thus, whilst on the one hand describing the lack of reconciliation that the sisters experience, Desai's novel also works within a conceptual framework that denies the efficacy of political and social intervention. At one point in the novel Nirode asks Monisha why she doesn't rebel against her position in the joint family, and receives the response: '"You said yourself these things do not matter. To leave and destroy, to stay and concur - what difference is there?"' (p. 135). Amla, called to account by former women's activist Aunt Lila, reiterates this view that the status quo is immutable (pp. 146 and 222). Yet their acceptance of this fact is countered by their protest at their condition, and it is this combination of protest and defeatism which is fundamental to Desai's rationale. It is significant that it is not until Clear Light of Day that Desai succeeds in resolving the contradiction in women's experience, and in the later

novel the resolution is achieved by a form of mythical and aesthetic resolution dramatised in Nirode's experience in Voices.

It is also significant that, whilst describing the reality of the tensions and effacement that women experience in their limited role as either observers (Monisha: p. 240; Amla: p. 220), or the objects of observation (the mute Gita Devi: pp. 70 and 49), Desai seems to need to rescue a positive role for women. It is ironic that it is only in the realm of myth that the figure of an all-powerful, completely 'whole' woman with an 'ageless love' can be found (pp. 209 and 133), and that the resurrection of this matriarchal myth proves to be the salvation of the central man in the text. It is ironic too that the nationalist-feminist campaigner Aunt Lila, who at the beginning of the novel is shown to believe that Amla is 'absolutely free and in the centre of such an exciting world' (p. 145) is forced eventually to accept that 'even freedom is old now' (p. 179).[40]

These ironies reveal that there are different forms of 'passivity' to be found in the work of Indian women writers, and that Desai's conception of women's acceptance is fundamentally different from that found in Markandaya's work. Both extol the virtues of this

condition, and emphasise the courage of the women who accept the social order, but in Desai's work we see an uneasy acceptance arise out of a condition of conflict. Whereas in Markandaya's novels passivity is encoded within a Gandhian conception of spiritual strength and moral resilience, in Desai's work passivity is shown to be a socially-enforced condition.

To conclude, in Voices in the City the position of women in the novel is necessarily, given the social understanding of the author, one of deadlock. Indeed it is by showing that Indian cultural traditions are immutable that the resolution of the novel, recalling the myth of Kali, is sustained. If, as Desai suggests in the novel, it is necessary to find language that will wake the country up from its sleep (p. 240), it appears that by resurrecting the mythical archetype of the goddess of death, Desai has not only described the tragedy of women's condition but also in fact begun to sanction a desire to escape into a different dream - fall into an alternative sleep - where art alone is the anaesthetic.

Notes and References

1. The novel follows the tripartite structure so characteristic of Desai's work and is an example of her self-professed concern with 'pattern' in the novel. See Atma Ram, 'Interview with Anita Desai', p. 100.

2. Those critics who fail to set this work in a modernist context have interpreted Maya's character in purely social terms. Thus one of them has written of her breakdown: 'In her we witness the ravings and rantings of a normal Indian housewife'. S.R. Jamkhandi, 'The Artistic Effects of Shifts in Points Of View in Anita Desai's Cry The Peacock, p. 36

3.The significance of Toto's name and its relationship with Maya's childishness has been alluded to by Ann Lowry Weir in her article, 'The Illusions of Maya: Feminine Consciousness in Anita Desai's Cry The Peacock, p. 2.

4. The other notable aspect of Maya's crisis, her struggle with her sexuality, is subliminally present in Desai's portrayal, and is evident primarily in Maya's dreams and the depiction of phallic symbols such as snakes and lizards. It is an element of the novel which has often been overlooked - Ann Lowry Weir has claimed that Desai totally omits sexuality in her depiction of Maya's psyche (ibid., p. 3.)-and deserves further study.

5. Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, pp. 11-12.

6. On the many occasions when Maya studies her face in the mirror she sees reflected 'the image of an upset child' (p. 145) or ' a round-faced child in a white petticoat' (p. 66).

7. Toril Moi, p. 101.

8. Ibid., p. 100.

9. A further example of this struggle to attain a lost unity is evident in Maya's difficulty in expressing herself in the symbolic order of language which has been studied by Kristeva. We are told that Maya 'groped' for words (p. 42) and is most at home in 'the world of sounds, sense, movements, odours, colours, tunes' (p. 92).

10. It is notable that with the exception of Where Shall We Go This Summer? all Desai's novels either exclude a mother figure or dwell, as in Voices in the City, Clear Light of Day and Baumgartner's Bombay, with the figure of an absent mother. When, in my interview with her, I asked Desai why this might be the case she was not able to explain it, and told me that her mother was not in fact absent during her childhood. One possible explanation is that, as Desai's mother was German and a foreigner within the Indian context, Desai does not have an 'Indian' mother figure to draw upon, and therefore does not include them in her work.

11. Juliet Mitchell, Psychoanalysis and Feminism. Mitchell argues that 'psychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a

patriarchal society but an analysis of one' (p. xv).

12. Moi, p. 7.

13. Bell Hooks, 'Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression' in Feminism and Equality, edited by Anne Phillips, pp. 72-73.

14. From my interview with Anita Desai cited in my 'Introduction to Anita Desai'.

15. J.L. Brockington, The Sacred Thread: Hinduism in its Continuity and Diversity, p. 52. Also see Joseph Campbell, Oriental Mythology, p. 254.

16. Brockington, pp.161 and 122.

17. The pure delight in the physical perception of the world is one which in her short story, Surface Textures, Desai describes as a state of religious grace. See Games at Twilight, pp. 34-40.

18. Foucault, Madness and Civilisation, p. 33. The close link between personal identity and madness has been explored by Barbara Hill Rigney. Her observation that in Mrs Dalloway 'madness becomes a refuge for the self rather than its loss' can be applied to Cry The Peacock too. Rigney,. Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel, p. 52.

19. Brockington, p. 123.

20. The passage can be contrasted with the one in Lawrence's Rainbow in which Ursula gains her ultimate sense of apartness when observing the moon when making

love.

21. Martin Seymour-Smith, Guide to Modern World Literature, pp. 725-26.

22. This symptomatic interpretation is one that Desai related to when she told me that Maya behaves like a child because she has no other option, and that Cry The Peacock is novel about how the individual woman is controlled by others.

23. J. Liddle and R. Joshi, Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India, p. 55.

24. S.A. Narayan has described Village By The Sea as Desai's most socially-grounded work but as this later work was written for children I think it belongs to a different category from her adult novels. See 'India', JCL (1983), p. 95.

25. Lunn, Marxism and Modernism, pp. 34 and 36.

26. V.N. Volosinov Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, pp. 12-41.

27. R. S. Sharma, Anita Desai p. 49.

28. C. Nash 'Myth and Modernism' in The Context of English Literature 1900-1930, ed. Michael Bell, p. 167.

29. R. K. Srivastava has chosen a good example of the extent to which Desai's rationalisation of an escape into art is absorbed into the novel's polemic. Ramesh K. Srivastava, 'Voices of Artists in the City', p. 51.

30. Brockington, p. 3.

31. Anita Desai, 'Indian Women Writers' in The Eye of the Beholder, edited by Maggie Butcher, p. 56.

32. Atma Ram 'An Interview with Anita Desai', p. 102; Anita Desai 'Indian Women Writers', p. 57.

33. Atma Ram, p.102.

34. Nash, p. 180.

35. Sharma, p. 48.

36. ibid. p.57.

37. Desai's portrayal of life within the joint family is substantiated by the findings of Liddle and Joshi even down to the circumstances such as being accused of theft. J. Liddle and R. Joshi, pp. 142-56.

38. R. Williams The Country and The City, p. 246.

39. Ibid., p. 247.

40. Meena Shirwadkar has drawn attention to the fact that 'very few [Indo-Anglian] novels depict the participation of women...in the freedom movement' and argues that 'this shows the inability of Indo-Anglian writers to grapple with the full reality of emancipated womanhood in India'. Shirwadkar, Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel, p. 122. Desai's inclusion of such a figure shows the extent to which she attempts to engage with a social and historical reality.

10

ABSOLUTE AFFIRMATION

This chapter focuses on Desai's movement towards that metaphysical stage described by Camus as 'absolute affirmation' where 'the individual is lost in the destiny of the species and the eternal movement of the spheres'. Camus uses the term to describe a Nietzchean perspective which is curiously suited to Desai's particular combination of theologically-inscribed acquiescence and aesthetic delight in the sensual. Yet the form of affirmation in Desai's novels is fundamentally different from that defined by Camus. Whilst for Camus it is a state that is marked by 'the deification of fate' and a 'transmutation of values which consists ... in replacing critical values by creative values', for Desai the affirmation far from resolving, or escaping from, social contradictions involves embracing them.[1]

In all her later works Desai presents the world as being both amoral and contradictory . . . In Fire On The Mountain she studies the violence and propensity for murder that lurks beneath the surface of even the most tranquil settings and that has dramatic effects on the

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lives of such innocuous characters as a reclusive old woman and solitary girl. But the movement towards Desai's 'absolute affirmation' can best be studied through the novels Where Shall We Go This Summer?, Clear Light of Day and In Custody. Between them, these works show how Desai moves from protest to acquiescence, how this is paralleled by a movement from the private world to the public world, and how, for women in particular, spiritual harmony is achieved at the expense of social sacrifice.

Where Shall We Go This Summer? (1975) and Clear Light of Day (1980)

In Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Clear Light of Day Desai shows how women who choose to escape (into the world of childhood) have eventually to face reality and compromise. Women are the accommodators in these novels and their predicament is illuminated by Desai's focus on their psychological development. The anguish, frustration, loneliness and uncertainty experienced by the middle-class wives and financially independent spinsters highlights the essential dilemmas facing women caught between the conflicting demands of obedience to time-sanctioned roles and duty to themselves in discovering their own identity

freed from the constraints of stereotypic assumptions. In both these novels, however, women are shown to be accommodators, unable to initiate change - a view which on the social and cultural levels attests to the power of patriarchy in modern India. It is in the inner reality of feeling and emotion that women negotiate the conflicting demands put on them - a negotiation that is never fully resolved, allowing women a degree of self-assertion only in their limited and limiting sphere of domestic activity.

The girlhood of the protagonists is shown to lie at the very heart of both novels. But unlike Cry The Peacock, where Maya's past serves as the ideological grid through which she perceives the present, in these later works the author permits two different perspectives on the past: the child's actual experience of it, and the adult's memory of it. It is in the resonance between these perspectives that the historical 'meaning' of the novel is situated. The structural cross-cutting locates the past, and in particular the events of 1947, as a crucial source of identity which conditions the women's lives. The year of 1947 is presented in the novels as a year of violence and misery in the wake of the Partition riots, and the political fact of Independence is subsumed by a wider analysis of the social and psychological condition of a people in the years following the freedom struggle. As

will be seen, Desai's representation of her country is one which suggests that India has, in the past forty years, substituted one form of violence for another - and that the rise in living standards has done little to alleviate the lot of the middle-class Indian woman who, in these novels, becomes a symbol of all womankind.

The transitional status of women in the novels is both social and psychological. In Where Shall We Go This Summer? the heroine has a developed sense of her identity which is shown to contend against accepted social norms of behaviour and understanding. This results in a schism, a split, in her personality as she tries to fulfil her social obligations as wife and mother, and simultaneously explore her own individual needs. The novel shows that while women may comply with social expectations in their actions, they retain a deeper psychological sense of identity which, in being denied the right to express itself publicly, constitutes an alternative realm of meaning and value - a realm that defines itself against the violence, corruption and oppression of the social world. For example, Sita's frantic desire not to bring forth another child into a land of naturalised violence is at once an expression of maternal protection and a condemnation of modern India. The suffering of women itself becomes an indictment of society, and the moral

force the author invests them with a latent force of social transformation.

The divided, unfulfilled female persona of Where Shall We Go This Summer? so urgently expressive of women's frustration at an artificially circumscribed life, is evident in three presentations of womankind found in Clear Light of Day. Yet the overwhelming presence of divided women in the later novel is contained by an essentially optimistic and, I argue, idealist notion that what are essentially social contradictions can be resolved through symbolic containment. Bim is a mainstay of traditional values as well as a modern woman who earns her own living. In representing the successful fusion of the contending demands of past and present she becomes symbolic of Mother India's[2] capacity for accommodation and endurance rather than celebrative of a new identity. Thus the aesthetic resolution of what are commonly understood to be socially incompatible states is in fact a statement of the lack of change in women's position - Bim's accommodation representing the sacrifice necessary for compatibility. Although both novels seriously engage in presenting the condition of women, they differ in their polemical thrust. The former can be seen as one that incites condemnation of the system, and the latter one that invites complacency or

resignation to the belief that the patriarchal order is indeed beyond change.

The Transitional Status of Women

The term 'transitional' has been used by sociologists to describe the position of those women 'whose lives are much influenced by traditional norms and yet they are forerunners in carving out new roles for women'.[3] Sita, the heroine of Where Shall We Go This Summer?, has the courage of her convictions in daring to reject continued compromise. Trapped in a venal, male-dominated middle-class world peopled by men such as her husband's associates, whom she regards as 'Animals' for whom 'Only food, sex and money matter' (p. 47), Sita's view that the world is unfit to receive her child constitutes a deep challenge to established middle-class values and institutions. It is a challenge which gains active expression in her departure from her home, and which is made from her privileged position as wife and mother. (Coming from outside the public sphere Sita is shown to be untainted by it.) In her uncompromising demand for the revision of established institutions she not only presents a feminist case founded on her own condition as a woman, but a nationalist one based on her rejection of the arrogance and venality of the rising middle-class who

increasingly control the power structures of independent India.

Sita's challenge is shown to emerge from a deep frustration with those 'traditional norms' which have been conveniently maintained despite, or perhaps because of, an expanding capitalism which widens the opportunities for many men. The apathy of the conscious, bored housewife is powerfully conveyed in the condition of waiting which gains metaphorical importance in this, as in so many, Desai novels.[4] 'Bored, dull, unhappy, frantic' in marriage and motherhood (p. 144), she feels trapped in the mechanistic routine of an existence in which waiting becomes her only legitimate activity. Part of Desai's rhetoric is to exalt this condition of woman so that it becomes expressive of a larger meaning alluding to life itself. In waiting without knowing exactly what she is waiting for, as the gestating heroine does on the island, Sita experiences time most purely. The existential confrontation with the absurd meaninglessness of life is epitomised in the despair of the heroine. In the foreign hitch-hiker who follows a path 'not knowing ... but going on nevertheless' (p. 52), Sita sees a logical extension of her own courage; the hitch-hiker not only waits, but has the freedom to explore all the options available to him. He describes for Sita the personal crisis confronting

those who yearn to break new ground but are uncertain where it will lead them, looking beyond dispossession to a period of discovery. Thus in Where Shall We Go This Summer? Desai not only presents women's frustrations as a social challenge, but also suggests, through her evocation of women's feelings, the outcome of such a challenge.

Before analysing Desai's presentation of women's reaction to their present circumstances, and how such a presentation calls for change, it is necessary to understand what the author considers to be the roots of her characters' identity. The girlhood of the protagonists in both Where Shall We Go This Summer? and Clear Light of Day reveals that loneliness and parental neglect are important incentives to the development of an uninhibited autonomous awareness. Sita and Bim are both at a social advantage to the majority of girls in being initially liberated from familial demands and the obligation to have arranged marriages. That the early independence of the heroines of both novels eventually concedes, in action if not in mind, to the patriarchal order shows that Desai sees the power of the patriarchy as still too strong to be undermined. The hold of the past on the women's minds is thus one which allows the heroines to draw emotional sustenance from the memory of their fully

autonomous selves in which in both action and mind they remained relatively free.

In contrast to Cry The Peacock, in which Maya's childhood was divided into an artificial realm based on the exclusion of ugliness and simultaneously shown as the repository of nightmares, in these later novels we see a tendency to idealise the childhood state, to perceive through parental neglect and personal isolation a self-sufficient wholeness. But when attention shifts from the personal to the historical level, idealisation gives way to a scrupulous attention to the contradictions, violence and suffering inherent in India's birth as a nation. Indeed Desai makes a conscious effort to demythologise events which occur during the crucial year of 1947. The egocentricity and wilful treachery of Sita's father, who is hailed as a 'Second Gandhi' (p. 86), are exposed, as is the reduction of national aims to purely solipsistic ones (p. 75). The Babaji following Gandhi's non-violent precepts exploits the very tradition he is trying to maintain, and crushes jewels into putative medicinal concoctions less because he believes in the therapeutic value of faith, but because he wants to attract personal favour among the people and '"make the poor fellows see that I am really doing my best for them"'(p. 82). Myth-making is shown to be encouraged by a society where

'Practical achievements and shady hocus-pocus wound in and out of each other to form one inextricable strand, knotted but whole' (p. 74). In the novel Desai debunks several of these myths which have become elevated to the status of traditional folklore. We learn that, contrary to public opinion, the Babaji was an extremely ugly man, the acclaimed well-water was in truth brackish, and the legendary rice crop was not in reality a success. Desai demonstrates how the extravagant displays of service and self-sacrifice that go into the creation of a legend serve to obscure the real heroines and heroes of the time whose sacrifice goes unrecognised. The view that women are effectively excluded from history (a view that is reaffirmed in In Custody) is powerfully expressed in the opening and close of the novel when the chorus of collective sentiment praises the deeds of Sita's fabled father, and finally and conclusively dismisses Sita:

> 'She was mad,' Moses explained. 'Got angry too just like that, for nothing, all the time ... Let her go. Who cares? We will only remember him, the father. How he lived, and his magic. The island is his, it is really his.'
> 'Still it is his,' the sick man agreed in a quaver.
> 'Who is she to come here to live?' Jamila demanded.
> 'Let her go.' 'Let her go,' Moses growled, and they all dipped their heads and drank. (p. 157)

Sita released from memory is also effaced from time and it is clear that what is essentially a fraudulent 'magic' of

a patriarch is preferred to the genuine emotional experience or 'madness' of a mother.

By being pushed out of history, the protagonist is effectively granted an ahistorical stance which privileges her morally conditioned and emotionally sanctioned insight. As in Clear Light of Day, Indian society is shown in the novel to be decadent and retrograde. The period of Independence is remembered for the violence which accompanied Partition when, 'having taken one step forward into civilisation, the country now reeled a dozen steps backward into barbarity' (p. 92). This regression it is argued continues on a national scale and even infects the potentially pure island of Manori where the servants become alcoholic, the Babaji's chelas, or disciples, desert him, and the House of Soul begins to collapse. Perhaps the most striking image, employed in both novels, of the collapse of national ideals, is that of the milking cow drowned in a well. This is not only a metaphor of motherhood reinforced by its association with the womb, but a political statement - the image of the milking cow being the symbol of the Congress party which carried the country to Independence. That the ideals of women and nationalists are 'drowned' suggests that Desai's novel, which gives expression to those seemingly suppressed vital energies that are the essence of humankind, articulates a

concern not only with altering the condition of women but with restructuring society on new foundations. Most critics, including Professor Iyengar,[5] see Desai as an eminently psychological novelist operating within the bounds of emotion alone. But the ideological thrust of her work has got to be recognised if she is to be given the credit due to her as a writer concerned not only with expressing the mental condition of women but in putting forward a view for social regeneration.

As Sita's energies are suppressed, her personality becomes a dualistic one in which a distinction is drawn between physical acquiescence and mental unease. Sita embodies the initial restlessness and frustration of women who awaken to the awareness of the inadequacy of the role offered them, which results in an essential opposition between circumstance and aspiration: 'Physically resigned, she could not inwardly accept this was all there was to life' (p. 54). Her view that domestic concerns are ultimately of little importance comprises not only a rejection of the role thrust upon her, but a condemnation of a male-controlled middle-class society which threatens to impinge on her own autonomous identity. Sita's retreat to the island shows her removing herself from the static given structures of society that define her role for her.

On Manori she is faced with the problem of reconstructing her identity on new bases.

In describing her search for a feminine style of writing, Anita Desai observed a truth which can be transposed onto women's quest for their identity: 'I discovered it was very difficult to search for something when you are not quite sure what it looked like'.[6] Sita appears to know what she rebels against but is uncertain as to what exactly she fights for. In a land where 'the creative impulse had no chance against the overpowering desire to destroy' (p. 46), it would seem that Sita yearns for a society in which all that is vital and productive, like herself, can regain expression. In describing what might be however she consciously flouts the authority of what is. This takes the superficial form of her public smoking and her rejection of the centrality of cooking in women's lives. It also takes deeper forms: Sita's quest for her identity is necessarily immersed in the altogether more complex and substantial realms of history and what Desai portrays as an emotionally realised feminine sensibility. Let us analyse both these elements.

Denied the conventional social crutch of employment, Sita is significantly granted one form of social identity to aid her in her search. Brought up during the turmoil of

the freedom struggle, she feels she belongs 'to this whole society at that particular point in history' (p. 85). Her personal quest is thus abstracted into the quest of Indian women since Independence. Apart from this emblematic social function, Sita is, like Maya in the earlier novel, shown to gain her sense of autonomy from drawing upon her emotional reserves. For a woman who finds the meaning of life in intense love (see p. 148) it is particularly crippling to be constrained within a world of violence, and bound to a rationalist and materialistic family at whose head is a 'middling kind of man, ... dedicated unconsciously to the middle way' (p. 47). Sita's insecurity results from the failure of her emotional drives to find adequate social expression and, inversely, the absence of social accommodation to her particular needs. By focussing on women's emotional concerns Desai stresses the importance of those complaints and frustrations commonly dismissed as insignificant. Drawing from her own experience she writes in an article:

> I myself have enjoyed, when in a certain mood, dragging my slippers to make a dull monotonous sound that irritates the listener and satisfies the maker: it is a kind of statement, the only kind women allowed themselves to make for a long time. I have done a good deal of that slipper-dragging in my own writing and it irritates me now as profoundly as it satisfied me then.[7]

Squeezed into viewing the concerns of life through the blinkers of familial involvement, the women in Desai's novels are portrayed as hyper-sensitive, irrational and in contact with a pure realm of experience that is both spiritual and sensual. The field of participation permitted to them being the domestic, it is little surprise that the only form of protest allowed them is familial. In desiring not to give birth, Sita not only challenges the tendency to take child-bearing for granted, but voices a protest from within the frame of reference which is her only legitimate one. Sita's protest is thus a crucial challenge in demanding the revaluation of concerns peculiar to women, and which can therefore not rightfully be contested by men.

Yet, as is evident at the end of the novel, the dictates of institutionalised control are, in the person of her husband Raman, too strong to be repelled. The profusion of questions at the end of the work (pp. 152-53) shows that although the crucial questions on women's identity remain unresolved, a challenging disquiet is still there. With Sita's renewed commitment to the present and the affirmation made throughout the novel of the need for reform, Where Shall We Go This Summer? is undoubtedly a novel which concludes on a note of defiance. Sita's final act of acceptance is described with a lyrical irony

suggestive of the contrast between her acceptance and the emotional and mental freedom she had enjoyed on the island. After an unresolved argument with her husband who abandons her to her 'emotional excesses' (p. 140), Sita is forced to return to the middle-class society which oppresses her whilst her sense of personal identity, of personal freedom, remains in silent judgement:

> She stood still, straddling the line where the water met the sand, clashed and separated, and felt herself released and freed. Immensely tired now, all emptied out, the drama drained, the passion crumpled, she felt so light that she could have risen and floated out to sea, a black sea-bird. But she did not. The wind jumped up and buffeted her so that she could not stand still and she began to trail after him, knowing she would follow him, follow the trail of footprints he had laid out for her. Like the freed sea-bird at evening, she wheeled around and began to circle about and then dropped lower and lower toward her home.
>
> She lowered her head and searched out his footprints so that she could place her feet in them, as a kind of game to make walking back easier; and so her footprints mingled with his, sometimes accurately and sometimes not, made a chain of links, wet and muddy hollows, across the washed and brushed sand. (p. 150)

In attempting to demythologise and destablise the tenets and dictates of Indian tradition, Desai brings to bear upon it a peculiarly Western sensibility. On one level this sensibility is conceived in literary terms: apart from the repeated citation of Lawrence's poem the novel has, as one critic points out, a narratorial affinities with The Tempest and Lawrence's 'The Woman Who

Rode Away'.[8] On a broader level Desai's allegiance to Western modes of perception - particularly in its existential manifestation - reveals an attempt to rationalise the frustrations of the isolated modern consciousness within a seemingly static social context immune from change. With a delicacy characteristic of her style, Desai describes India's remarkable capacity for accommodation through Raman, who is prepared to accept novelty 'as long as it made for comfort, for security, for continuity and safety from change and scandal' (p.130). Frustration with the old order could not have been more clearly expressed.

Clear Light of Day

It might appear a trifle incongruous that the response by the male protagonists to Sita and Bim, the heroines of the two works, is the exact opposite of what might be expected; for the woman who actively complies with the patriarchal codes is condemned by Raman and Moses as outrageous, and the woman who appears to be a 'forerunner in carving out new roles for women'[9] is hailed as a paragon of virtue by her male friend, the doctor. This results from two fundamental differences between the novels. One is that in Where Shall We Go This Summer?

Desai appropriates the Indian myth of the the Ramayana in order to articulate a feminist perspective. Sita and Raman do not only share the names of the mythical figures but under-go a similar form of separation with Sita confined to an island. Only unlike the legend which focuses on the abduction, exile and, above all, chastity of the heroine, in Desai's novel emphasis is placed on the wilful escape and 'madness' of the heavily pregnant heroine.[10] The sense of transgression is evident in the novel's title which as Desai has pointed out has 'an illicit ring' to it.[11]

In addition the two novels make a distinction between the observed actions of the heroines and their psychological states. Although Sita accedes to her husband's wishes, her rebellious state of mind is potentially far more subversive than the careerist's stoic and unconscious acceptance. Before analysing the presentation of Bim, I would like first to reveal how Desai suggests acceptance of the patriarchal order through the three other depictions of women's condition in Clear Light of Day - Aunt Mira, the Misra sisters and Tara - which are finally contained by a seemingly optimistic, if quietist, view of women's possibilities for fulfilment in the characterisation of Bim.

In the depiction of Aunt Mira, Desai renders social oppression into psychological terms. The facts of her oppression are baldly stated: widowed at fifteen, she becomes a domestic drudge in her husband's home, is cast out of it when she is no longer useful and accepted by the Das family out of pity. Yet, the significance of these facts is never explored. Indeed the facts constitute little more than the co-ordinates of Aunt Mira's guilt and the self-contained world of madness in which it operates. Made to feel responsible for the death of her husband because of the superstitious beliefs of his family who hold that her bad horoscope hastened his death, she also blames herself for the death of the milking cow (p. 108), which becomes her chief preoccupation as she succumbs to alcoholism and insanity. An unwarranted sense of culpability can only arise from an innate feeling of inferiority. In failing to tether the depiction of psychological and emotional experience to the social context which conditions it, Desai runs the risk of treating women's inner life as a timeless and mysterious entity. Aunt Mira's only relation to the real world is in her psychological escape from its demands, her withdrawal into the realm of a neurosis for which she, rather than society, is blamed.

Whilst Aunt Mira is, in truth, the victim of tradition, the Misra sisters are trapped in the polarised demands of change and continuity. Divorced women, they eke out a living by giving dancing lessons choreographing scenes of legendary love, whilst their idle, demanding brothers who are financially dependent upon them pass the hours 'dressed in summer clothes of fine muslin, drinking iced drinks and discussing the day which meant very little since the day for them had been as blank and unblemished as an empty glass' (p. 30). The contending demands of an evolving India are clearly contained by a patriarchy which, as the Misra elder points out, adapts to and takes advantage of the financial independence allowed to women:

> Drinking whisky all day that their sisters have to pay for - did you ever hear of such a thing? In my days our sisters used to tie coloured threads on our wrists on Rakhibandhan day, begging for our protection, and we gave them gifts and promised to protect them and take care of them, and even if it was only a custom, an annual festival, we at least meant it ... But they - they let their sisters do the same ceremony, and they just don't care what it means as long as they get their whisky and have time to sit on their backsides drinking it. Useless rubbish, my sons. Everything they ever did has failed ... (pp. 32-33)

Economic dependence has been replaced by the daily drudgery of doing a job they are shown to loathe. This vignette of enforced self-sacrifice shows Desai's essentially negative view of women's achievement since

Independence in which the patriarchal order is shown to have increased its hold. The fact that the sisters are meant to represent the strength of traditional ideologies is evident later in the nove when all the Misra siblings are shown to have failed marriages because their modern spouses reject their traditional ways (p. 151). That their position as earners works against them is the ultimate irony in a seemingly bitter view of social evolution.

Thus modern notions, far from being liberating, are shown to be as confining as traditional ones. They erode the certainties of tradition, yet leave nothing in their place; as Bim points out: 'Old Delhi does not change. It only decays' (p. 5). The decadence is shown to operate on a national scale as the Indian diplomat, Tara's husband, is shown to feed off ideological clichés in advertising his country in terms of 'the Taj Mahal - the Bhagavad Gita - Indian philosophy - music - art -the great, immortal values of ancient India' (p.35). Bim's response to this mythologising of an expatriate who consciously ignores social contradictions is suitably cutting:

> 'If you lived here, and particularly if you served the Government here, I'm not sure you could ignore bribery and corruption, red-tapism, famine, caste-warfare and all that. In fact living here, working here, you might easily forget the Taj Mahal and the message of the Gita -' (pp. 35-36)

Despite her glib documentation of social evils 'and all that', Bim's argument is that the advertised 'eternal India' is evoked to disguise the misuse of power. This citation does not however effectively describe the contrast between the expatriate and the home view of India maintained in the novel. Where Tara and Bakul are shown to be disappointed and disillusioned by the failure of their country to live up to their ideals, Bim, aware of social contradictions, is shown to courageously accept them. By situating Bim as the exponent of social ills as well as the traditionalist in the novels, Desai sets up a conciliatory polemic. That women are particularly worse off in the country is something that the novel implicitly contends but never makes as explicitly as in the diatribe cited.

Tara is another depiction of an emotionally developed but traditionally constrained woman in Clear Light of Day. It is through her that the psychological split, implicit in the condition of Aunt Mira and the Misra sisters, is most fully explored as a social dilemma. On returning to her childhood home she is divided between happiness at reclaiming the familiar, recalling a girlhood of ideals, and unease at being compelled to see it anew, discovering the discrepancy between ideals and reality and that life is 'a snail found, a pearl lost' (p. 103). Desai

rewrites past and present in terms of childhood and adulthood. The historical context, with Independence embodying national ideals which have also come to nothing, is collapsed into a personal realm whose governing forces are psychological and emotional rather than historical. Tara's childhood ideals are shown to condition her actions in a way that draws attention to the discrepancy between ideals and reality, the continued dialogue between past and present. Always hoping as a child to 'discover herself a princess' (p. 102), it is clear that her desire to be a mother is based on her conception of a wife as

> someone like her mother who raised her eyes when the father rose from the table and dropped them when he sat down; who spent long hours at a dressing-table before a mirror, amongst jars and bottles that smelt sweet and into which she dipped questing fingers and drew out the ingredients of a wife - sweet-smelling but soon rancid; who commanded servants and chastised children and was obeyed like a queen. (pp. 110-11)

This glamorised childhood vision which misconceives domestic duty as power conditions her actions as an adult. Married at eighteen to a promising foreign office trainee she is granted all the material comforts she could desire. She is in the process transformed, as Bakul proudly points out, from a listless dreamer into an efficient wife. She does, in other words, cope remarkably well with the demands made upon her and adjusts to the modern patriarchal order. The novel's depiction of Tara's

progress from child to adult ultimately affirms what one critic has called 'continuity in change'[12] or the immutability of a society which renders ideals into illusions and thereby a source of suffering.

Whilst accepting the immutability of society Desai seeks to salvage from it a positive, creative role for women as willing accommodators. Bim, thrust into the role of housekeeper as an adolescent, becomes a veritable superwoman tending a younger sister, a tubercular brother, an alcoholic aunt, a retarded younger brother, working in a refugee camp and, later, studying, holding a job as a history lecturer and running the family insurance business whilst continuing to look after her younger brother. Symbolic of Mother India in her immense capacity for love and nurture,[13] she is also a cigarette-smoking careerist who had once wanted to wear men's clothes and who loathes the sentimentalists who regard her single state as evidence of her sacrifice. In her the conflicting demands of duty to oneself and allegiance to the established order are reconciled, but at a price: such a balance demands that she adapt to, rather than challenge, her social context. Bim's position as a wage-earner never threatens the established order of things since in her capacity for devotion and stoic, unquestioning acceptance, she comes to be a touchstone of a tradition that weathers change.

Maintaining the family home and business, she also retains the old values of self-sacrifice and service epitomised in the Indian ideal of womanhood, the Sita of the Ramayana. Her recitation from the passage in The Wasteland, recalling Christ's martyrdom, shows her unconscious admiration for this state, and her very choice of T.S. Eliot, a poet for whom the past is a symbol of unity and meaning in an age of chaos, is significant. Thus in portraying the resolution of the conflict evident in the earlier novel, Where Shall We Go This Summer?, in the depiction of her heroine, Bim, Desai seems to efface the social contradictions she had earlier presented.

Yet this resolution, in which Desai grants poetic laurels to prosaic sacrifice, involves a struggle. Bim feels taken for granted and, like tradition, only 'precious on account of age' (p. 153). Unlike Tara and her brother Raja, who marry into wealth, Bim is beset with financial worries. These difficulties seem to contend with, rather than emerge out of, her advanced and 'liberated' way of thinking in which she rejects her status as a martyr because she detests the degrading sanctimoniousness, embodied by Mrs Biswas, that the concept invites (p. 92), and refuses to see herself as a social inferior to her brother and sister. This discrepancy between Bim's way of thinking and her social

condition, in which she is materially and physically constrained, shows Desai's resolution between the demands of past and present is essentially an idealistic one.

This idealism is given a specific human shape which asserts its very humanity through its imperfections: Bim, far from being faultless, has one weakness with which the reader can identify - her resentment at being treated as a social inferior by a brother of whom she was once very fond (p. 29). Yet even this is treated as a psychological impediment rather than a socially informed anxiety, such that Bim's moment of fulfilment, her Epiphany, comes not when her brother apologises (he never does), but when she overcomes her resentment and gets rid of the one thing that inhibits her capacity for absolute, uncompromising love. Purged of her bitterness, which the novel seems to suggest is in truth an unwarranted grudge, Bim becomes aware not only of her increased capacity for selfless devotion to her family, but also of her ability to cope with whatever life may deal her. She becomes the ultimate martyr - a condition which Desai exalts in the novel, and which she suggests is the only possible positive role available to women:

> Although it was shadowy and dark, Bim could see as well as by the clear light of day that she felt only love and yearning for them all [her family] and if they were hurts, these gashes and wounds in her side that bled, then it was only because her love was

> imperfect and did not encompass them thoroughly enough, and because it had flaws and inadequacies and did not extend to all equally. (p. 165)

The social conditions of Bim's anxiety as tenant to her brother are shown to be invalid as the problem, ultimately, is purely a psychological one.

The dissociation between social cause and psychological effect is the primary means by which Desai is able to reconcile the conflicts that give rise to the transitional status of women. Unlike the earlier novel, the conclusion of Clear Light of Day presents a resolution of social contradictions by affirming the significance of a timeless realm which contains and effaces all conflict. It is an aesthetic resolution which Desai, having been inspired by an evening concert, added after the book was sent for publication; she told me it replaced a 'more prosaic' original ending.[14] Listening to the guru's song, Bim achieves an inner peace which comes of the knowledge of her importance as the mainstay of traditional values:

> With her inner eye she saw how her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well s her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences - not binding them within some dead and airless cell but giving them the soil in which to send down their roots, and food to make them grow and spread, reach out to new experiences and new lives, but always drawing from the same soil, the same secret darkness. The soil contained all time, past and future, in it. (p. 182)

The quietly optimistic strain which controls Desai's presentation of women in the novel is reinforced by the profusion of weak, idle and effete men who populate the work - the idle Misra brothers; Hyder Ali's fawning servant; Raja, whose heroic ideals give way to parasitic opportunism; Dr Biswas who has the 'face and posture of all nonentities' (p. 67); and Bakul who vegetates 'flabbily, flaccidly' (p. 7) whilst expounding the glories of India. Moreover, the childhood period of 'dullness, boredom, waiting' (p. 4) and the horror of the Partition riots both being over, suggests that the present, peopled with weak men, affords women the perfect opportunity for bettering themselves. Yet the presentation of women as survivors suggests a different social truth. It seems that the questions put forward in Where Shall We Go This Summer? on women's identity are answered in Clear Light of Day: women's source of self-definition and strength ultimately derives from an inner, emotional life impervious to the authority of men. Whereas in Where Shall We Go This Summer? Desai presents a social challenge and celebrates women's growing desire to influence change, in Clear Light of Day the author rewrites the social determinants of women's oppression in terms of willing self-sacrifice. The earlier work's intention to describe women's condition gives way in Clear Light of Day to a preoccupation with exploring womanhood itself.

It is her latest work to date in which she explores the experience and inner world of Indian women. Yet it is not her last novel to explore the theme of marginality and the relationship between life and art. In In Custody she shows how men too can be the victims of oppression, and translates her ideology of absolute acceptance onto the 'public' world of career aspirations and material success. As will be seen Desai's feminism - her preoccupation with exploring the tensions and contradictions Indian women experience - takes a new and dramatic turn in this novel.

In Custody (1984): Accepting the Ordinary

In In Custody Desai seeks to reconcile her modernist concern with the 'demise of the integrated individual'[15] with a social vision describing the realities of physical and material survival in Indian society, not only rendering but also making sense of the material world that traps and diminishes human experience. The result is a novel that contains two modes of representation, each in critical opposition to the other: an ordered, imaginative, idealistic world of art and spirituality set against a social world ruled by materialism, suffering and chaos - one drawing on the resources of poetry, metaphor and symbol, the other on the descriptive, concrete and analytical resources of literary realism.

It is the Hindi teacher Deven's attempt to bridge these two worlds - 'to reconcile the meanness of his existence with the purity and immensity of his literary yearnings' (p. 26) - that forms the thematic crux of the novel. From the start, when he is forcefully persuaded (almost commanded) by his former schoolmate, Murad, to interview a respected and ageing Urdu poet called Nur, Deven is shown to be motivated both by a social desire for recognition and fame, and a personal and artistic ambition to revive

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the Urdu language. Urdu, and Nur's poetry in particular, is the language in which Deven expresses his highest thoughts and dreams of his childhood - 'his first language when he was a child in the half-forgotten, unsubstantial city of childhood, and which was still his first love' (p. 16). In reciting Nur's poetry which 'lay beneath all [the] visible tips of his submerged existence' (pp. 39-40), he feels whole again. Therefore, his attempt to interview and thereby become an authority on Nur offers him the chance to impose a certain unity and fulfilment on his disordered life.

Yet Deven, to his surprise, finds Nur living not in splendid isolation, but in the company of inebriated and bawdy followers and in the care of greedy, shrewish wives. The temple of art that he had anticipated is instead a circus full of 'clowns and jokers and jugglers' (p. 51). Indeed Nur himself appears to be the very opposite of the god Deven had imagined him to be; cursing and admitting to having met his second wife in the 'temple' of a brothel (p.46), and to having not a crown but a 'throne of thorns' (his piles) (p. 47). Deven's heroism begins when he is gradually able to overcome his natural fastidiousness and timidity through his increasing concern for the poet. This begins with the episode when he rushes to the sick poet's aid, protects him from his violent wife and ends up

cleaning up after him possibly with manuscripts of Nur's work so that 'poetry [is] forever mixed with vomit in his mind' (p. 64).

Social reality continues to tread on his idealism. The world of art which had been Deven's one escape now becomes a trap, drawing him into a web of material and social obligations which he longs to leave behind but finds himself, through a combination of timidity, bad-luck and a sense of duty, unable to extricate himself from.[16] In this novel, which Desai has told me was written out of a desire to make a 'conscious break with the personal',[17] Desai engages with social reality on two levels: first, her thematic concern with the material conditions that structure experience; and secondly, her formal appropriation of textual devices - such as material contextualisation where characters are 'situated...within the entire historical dynamics of their society' - traditionally conceived to be realist.[18]

In the following pages I will show how Desai's metaphysical development towards absolute affirmation extends so that instead of escaping into art, she describes a social commitment to it. In the process Desai breaks down those barriers between art and life, male and female worlds that she had set in opposition to one

another in her earlier fiction. In Deven's failed attempt to record the poet on tape and distil from the recording a work of art purified of social influence, Desai reveals the inextricability of the two worlds. Further this novel, set in the male-dominated public world, marks not so much a movement towards the '"masculine" concerns' of 'action, experience and achievement', but rather a movement towards an interrogation of the relationship between the 'female' world of 'thought, emotion and sensation' and the public world.[19] It is no coincidence that Desai's depiction of women, (studied in my second section), is in complete contrast to her earlier work. The women in this novel are shown to be materialistic and tough. They belong to that commercial world that Deven longs to escape from. It will become clear that in seeking to broaden her novel from the women-orientated, subjective narrative of her earlier work and address national and social issues, Desai's metaphysical rebellion has come to embrace rather than escape from social contradictions, revealing how the calming, uncontentious sanctum of art emanates from a discordant and sometimes sordid social complex in which women play a significant, though often unrecognised, role. I begin by analysing the way in which Desai reveals the interaction between art and social reality in the novel.

Poetry in Life

Desai opens the novel by revealing both the material basis of the exercise of power and Deven's desire to escape from it. Thus the bullying manner in which Murad cajoles Deven into interviewing Nur for an edition of a literary magazine is not only the sign of Murad's forceful personality but also a symptom of his superior financial position - the wealth that has always given him power over his poor schoolmate. Deven is aware of his subordinate position, his compliant exterior disguising a silent resentment:

> Why should a visit from Murad upset him so much? There was no obvious reason of course - they had known each other since they were at school together: Murad had been the spoilt rich boy with money in his pocket for cinema shows and cigarettes and Deven the poor widow's son who could be bribed and bought to do anything for him. (p. 11)

Yet the gap between the real world and the ideal world is mediated not only by poverty but also by poetry - a form of writing which Desai has told me is for her 'the ultimate form' 'something to aspire to [and] ... write at the end of your life'.[20] In addition to this material domination, Murad is able to control Deven by appealing to his artistic aspirations. Murad encourages him to embark on the task of interviewing the poet by telling him to

adopt the admirable role of a disciple - a role sanctioned by a noble tradition of religious and cultural devotion:

> 'I know five, six people who would be happy to go and fill his inkwell and sharpen his pens, thinking it a golden chance to learn the art of poetry from a great master. You are forgetting our Indian tradition, Deven. You are forgetting the guru-shishya tradition - how the shishya sits at the feet of his guru, for years, years -sometimes till his own hair is white.' (p. 76)

This dialectic between artistic aspiration and material constraint is extended into the social and historical framework of the novel. The town of Mirpore is shown to contain a tangible spirit of mediocrity from which art offers the only escape for Deven. It embodies the shabbiness and alienation which he feels most acutely: it is a world without centre, without meaning.[21] Note how long, loose sentences are used to evoke the disorganisation and aimlessness of both the town and Deven's state of mind:

> Although it lacked history, the town had probably existed for centuries in its most basic, elemental form. Those shacks of tin and rags, however precarious and impermanent they looked, must have existed always, repetitively and in succeeding generations, but never fundamentally changing and in that sense enduring. The roads that ran between their crooked rows had been periodically laid with tar but the dust beneath was always present, always perceptible. In fact, it managed to escape from under the asphalt and to rise and spread through the town, summer and winter, a constant monsoon, always brief and disappointing on this northern plain more than a thousand miles from the coast, it turned to mud. But

> the sun came out again very soon and dried it to its usual grey and granular form. The citizens of Mirpore, petty tradesmen rather than agriculturalists, could not be blamed for failing to understand those patriotic songs and slogans about the soil, the earth. To them it was so palpably dust. (p. 19)

The immutability of life in Mirpore is related through the depiction of time as an undifferentiated continuum. It is a conception of time that is shown in the novel to be part of part of an Indian perspective (pp. 110 and 150) which sees time as an eternity, but also clearly belongs to the modernist temporal structure in which 'aesthetic ordering [is] based on synchronicity, the logic of metaphor or what is sometimes referred to as "spatial form"'.[22]

Desai goes on to show how history and legend are entwined in the town of Mirpore so that 'no one knew the difference' (p. 21). History is related synchronically; isolated events are dissolved into a background of general time whose slow progress manifests itself in the gradual diminution of a once impressive mosque now overrun by urban debris and gaudy Hindu temples in the 'dustbin' town (p. 66). The image of a mosque in danger of being swamped by both town and temples forms a metaphor for Deven's personal project: he wishes to extricate a great tradition of Urdu poetry from what he sees as the artistically and culturally arid embrace of both Hinduism and urbanisation.

This of course reflects Desai's engagement with the broader national concern with the social and religious antagonism between Moslem and Hindu. In Desai's text - as in India - art, politics and religion merge into each other:

> History had scattered a few marks and imprints here and there but no one in Mirpore thought much of them and certainly gave them no honour in the form of special signs, space or protection. The small mosque of marble and pink sandstone that had been built by a nawab who had fled from the retaliatory action of the British in Delhi after the mutiny of 1857 and wished to commemorate his safe escape ... was now so over grown by the shacks, signboards, stalls, booths, rags, banners, debris and homeless poor of the bazaars that it would have been difficult for anyone to discern it beneath this multilayered covering ... . It was by no means forgotten, it was still used, ... but not one of [the worshippers] thought of it as an historical landmark or remembered the man who had built it or his reasons for doing so.
>
> The temples were more numerous but had no history at all. There was literally not a man in Mirpore who could have told one when they were built or by whom. If one enquired, one might be told that a bright pink and white concrete structure with a newly-painted clay idol and fluorescent tubes for lights was five hundred years old; not strictly true of course but when one considered that its site might have been used for prayer that long, it was not all that false either. The temples had the same kind of antiquity that the shacks of the poor had, and the stalls of the traders - they were often wrecked rebuilt and replaced, but their essential form remained the same. There were also small stone shrines, mere apertures in walls, or half-smothered by the roots of rapacious banyan trees, that might have been truly old, but although some might have been able to provide them with legends, none could supply them with a history. The fact was that no one knew the difference. (pp. 19-21)

The passage not only embodies the interpenetration of multiple levels of meaning - ranging from the mundane to the religious - but also shows that history is a construct of the individual imagination, thereby emphasising the active part the individual has to play in its construction.

It is ironic that it is Deven's very desire to escape through poetry, which he loves 'not because it made things immediate but because it removed them to a position where it became bearable' (p. 54), that is the instrument that draws him into material and social commitments. It is through undertaking the role of a disciple, a man who wishes to reclaim the glories of Urdu poetry from the clutches of historical oblivion, that Deven is forced to grapple with the social, material and personal factors that are essential to the development of that poetry. It is a symbiosis between art and life that Deven rebels against, wondering whether 'in taking Nur's art into his hands [he had] ... to gather up the stained, soiled, discoloured and odorous rags of his life as well... . He knew he could not' (p. 158).

This dialectical impulse between artistic idealism and the material world is strongly brought to the fore in his frustrated attempt to interview the poet and tape-

record his memoirs. Deven, who doesn't know how to work a tape-recorder, arranges for a youth from the electrical shop to attend the interview and tape Nur's recitations for him. Yet Nur, who arrives with a contingent of cronies makes it clear that he is not going to be restricted by time, that he needs to eat and drink as well, and that his recitations are going to take place when he chooses. What results is a 'fiasco' (p. 173). The youth is asleep in those rare moments when Nur recites something new and ends up taping his orders for food and drink, his bawdy jokes and his quotations from other poets including Byron and Shelley. Indeed, the interview, which takes place in a brothel, with its rambling mix of conversation, music, and eating is strongly reminiscent of those other convivial gatherings at Siddiqui's and Raj's described in the novel (see pp. 134-41; and 165-66).

What the episode reveals is that art and life are inextricably entwined. Nur himself directly criticises the attempt by idealists (such as Deven) who attempt to separate the two saying '"We must get over this rolling of Urdu verse into little sugar pills for babies to suck"' (p. 53), and later points out (in response to Deven's failure to interview him properly) that it is impossible to engage successfully in '"the sifting and selecting from the debris of our lives"' (p. 167). The interview itself

is a symbolic enactment of this thesis. A mix of anecdote and literary quotation, of 'prose of the commonest variety' (p. 54) and poetry, conducted within the blare of traffic and the whirr of electric fans, it records the interaction between art and life.

For poetry and the aesthetic sensibility had offered Deven a compensation for the mediocrity of his world, not a means of overcoming it. Through his involvement with the ageing and exploited poet, an involvement originally based upon his admiration for Nur, he comes eventually to be motivated by an instinct to shield him from scroungers and parasites, including Nur's wives - an instinct which betrays an incisive appreciation of the poet's social and material needs. Yet it is by means of this very encounter with the interaction between the material and aesthetic that Deven is forced to face up to the reality that women, who are shown to occupy the material world in this novel with him, might also inhabit the world of art.

Women in the Material World

From her earliest work, Cry The Peacock, Desai has shown how men and women draw from two different realms of experience - how men belong to the public world where

'action, achievement and experience' are the main concerns and women to the private world of 'thought, emotion and sensation'.[23] In the course of her writing career this distinction has gradually broken down so that by the time of Clear Light of Day she shows a heroine who is able to adapt her sensitive awareness to the rigours of such material demands of earning a living and supporting her family. In Custody marks a breakthrough in Desai's fiction in that it shows women to be part of the material world. Greedy, hardened, manipulative and sometimes violent, the women in this novel stand in complete contrast to the sensitive, reflective Indian women of Desai's earlier novels. Nur's wives, who belong to a 'familiar female mafia' (p. 83), are shown to be materialistic and cruel (pp. 59 and 89) - one even presenting a reptilian threat to him (p. 118); the women of Deven's family are 'crafty and cautious' (p. 67) and Sarla, Deven's wife, is at best 'unpredictable' (p. 94), at worst malicious (p. 24) and materialistic - 'plain, penny-pinching and congenitally pessimistic' (p. 67).

Yet all these women are, as S. A. Narayan has pointed out,[24] seen through Deven's eyes, representing not only the materialism and violence that this timid and idealistic man shirks, but also an alien, threatening female world which he finds offensive. In distancing

himself not only from the sordid surroundings of Nur's more helpful first wife - ' this lighter of fires, washer of clothes and keeper of goats' (p. 122) - but also from the ' conviviality of steamy femininity' (p. 83) of Imtaz Begum's poetry-reading (where he dismisses her verse as the parody of Nur's work and the cliche-ridden writing of a former prostitute), Deven is turning away both from the mundane and from the recognition that poetry may reside in a sordid environment populated by uneducated women such as illiterate wives and whores. Indeed it is because of Imtaz Begum's past - and because she is a woman - that her poetry is dismissed as irrelevant by Deven. In a revealing passage that comes shortly before Deven's acceptance of his financial commitments and material bondage, Imtaz Begum berates the social hypocrisy and intellectual pettiness that lurk behind Deven's facade of cultural and aesthetic objectivity in a letter to him:

> I am enclosing my latest poems for you to read and study and judge if they do not have some merit of their own. Let me see if you are strong enough to face them and admit their merit. Or if they fill you with fear and insecurity because they threaten you with danger - danger that your superiority to women may become questionable. When you rose to your feet and left the mehfil while I was singing my verse, was it not because you feared I might eclipse the verse of Nur Sahib and other male poets whom you revere? Was it not intolerable to you that a woman should match their gifts and even outstrip them? Are you not guilty of assuming that because you are male, you have a right to brains, talent, reputation and achievement, while I, because I was born female, am condemned to find what satisfaction I can being maligned, mocked, ignored and neglected? Is it not

> you who has made me play the role of the loose woman in gaudy garments by refusing to take my work seriously and giving me just that much regard that you would extend to even a failure in the arts as long as the artist was male? In this unfair world that you have created what else could I have been but what I am?
>
> Ask yourself that when you peruse my verses, if you have the courage ... (p. 196)

It is significant that this feminist challenge immediately follows the observation that Deven is unable to show his feelings to his wife because 'it would have permanently undermined his position of power over her' (p. 195). In Imtaz Begum's letter Desai shows how 'brains, talent, reputation and achievement' are not exclusively male concerns and that Deven's inherent sexism constitutes a rejection of unpalatable truths about women's artistic achievements. The passage serves as a revelation in that it shows what may lie behind the formerly strident and grasping woman; in it Deven is confronted by 'the elegance and floridity of her Urdu' through which 'the essential, unsuspected spirit of the woman appeared to step free of its covering' (p. 196). He is forced to confront the fact that a former prostitute who in her own words has 'no education but what I have found and seized for myself' (p. 196), and has received little encouragement and sympathy, might be capable of writing good poetry.

But, we are told, Deven 'did not have the courage' to read her verse because if he were to do so 'what he learnt would destroy him as a moment of lucidity can destroy the merciful delusions of a madman' (p. 197). So whilst on the one hand he is able to accept his financial commitments to Nur as part of his commitment to art, he is unable to accept the fact that women too might have a place within this aesthetic realm, that his aesthetic judgements might be fundamentally flawed as they are based upon a principle of exclusion, and that the production of art is founded upon a social and material contingency that operates against women.

Thus the resolution at the end of the novel marks a qualified acceptance of the material basis of art by Deven. In the novel Desai presents women from a male perspective and their plight is no longer treated in subjective, psychological terms; it is placed in the context of a material, political and cultural condition. The fact that Deven is unable to confront the truth of women's contribution to art whilst recognising the material-basis of the aesthetic order is proof that his acceptance remains patriarchal and partial.

The true spirit of compromise is perhaps found in the poet himself, for Nur is both priestly and bawdy, in

touch with the real world and able to relate to everyone. He is not party to Deven's sexism, seeing merit in his second wife's work and showing an understanding of women's oppression that moves him, in his later works, to write a cycle of couplets 'on the subject of the suffering of women' (p. 129). This is in sharp contrast to his earlier and best loved poems which dwell on the romantic preoccupations on 'the enticements and frailties of women' (p. 156). His many financial demands, asking for money from Deven to cover food and drink, medical expenses, payment for his son's education, rent of the room and a pilgrimage to Mecca, reveal that he too is subject to the materialism formerly embodied by his wives. He inhabits both the world of art and the world of commerce.

In accepting financial commitments to Nur, Deven is also accepting a commitment to art and to life. He has a renewed awareness that allows him to accept the material world of which women form a part, reflecting that 'he was no longer irritated by the sight of her [his wife's] labour, or disgusted by the shabbiness of her limp' (p. 193). Art too, he is aware, is part of this material world and has a social significance.

It is this affirmation of the social significance of art that underlies Desai's ability to reconcile her impulse toward realism with her essentially modernist sensibility. The comic, the social and the historical are intimately linked with the tragic, the personal and the aesthetic. There is now a symbiosis. Faced with the loss of his job and the collapse of his social aspirations, Deven asserts a kind of spiritual affirmation in the teeth of financial ruin while simultaneously accepting the interpenetration of the apparently unreconcilable worlds of art and social reality. It is a symbiosis in which metaphor and symbol cause a prosaic social fact to resonate with new significance, or, as in the closing lines of the novel, in which high-flown metaphor is punctured by the very reality it seeks to transcend:

> [Deven] thought of Nur's poetry being read, the sound of it softly murmuring in his ears. He had accepted the gift of Nur's poetry and that meant he was custodian of Nur's very soul and spirit ... He turned back. Soon the sun would be up and blazing. The day would begin, with its calamities. They would flash out of the sky and cut him down like swords. He would run to meet them. He ran, stopping only to pull a branch of thorns from under his foot. (p. 203) [my emphasis]

In this novel we can see the extent to which Desai has moved towards absolute affirmation. By describing the intersection between social contradiction and poetry, she shows an active concern with revealing the material

basis of art and in showing grandeur in the ordinary. In the process social ills have come to be removed from the protective armour of Fate of her earlier fiction and placed squarely in the realm of human mediation. What's more the very fact that women are shown not to achieve the spiritual insight granted to the hero - and indeed to be rejected by him - suggests that Desai believes that the reality of women's experience remains one of metaphysical compromise, public diminution and aesthetic exile.

Notes and References

1. Albert Camus The Rebel, pp. 64 and 65.
2. The term 'Mother India' is used by R. S. Sharma in Anita Desai, p. 146.
3. Rhoda Louis Blumberg, and Leela Dwaraki, India's Educated Women, p. 134.

4. As in Cry The Peacock and In Custody, in Summer waiting epitomises not only passivity but also an existential experience of time.

5. K.R.S. Iyengar, Indian Writing in English, p. 464.

6. Anita Desai, 'Indian Women Writers' in The Eye of the Beholder edited by Maggie Butcher, p. 57.

7. Ibid., p. 56.

8. Sharma, pp. 95 and 105.

9. On the transitional status of women. See note 3 above.

10. I discuss Desai's use of mythical archetypes in greater detail in my 'Introduction to Anita Desai'.

11. Atma Ram, 'Interview with Anita Desai', p. 97.

12. Sharma, p. 139.

13. Quoted earlier in this chapter; from Sharma, ibid., p. 137 ff.

14. Desai told me this in my interview with her which I referred to in my 'Introduction to Anita Desai'.

15. Lunn, Marxism and Modernism, p. 37.

16. There are some startling similarities between Desai's novel and Markandaya's A Silence of Desire. Deven is presented as a sympathetic, if comical, figure. Timid, indecisive and set in his ways, he resembles Dandekar from Markandaya's novel. Like Dandekar, Deven is embroiled into a process he feels he cannot control and enters an alien world occupied by strange figures including a 'gnome' (p. 48). Like Dandekar, Deven is shown to be unadventurous and

have a relationship with his wife that is based upon silences (p. 146). And like Dandekar, Deven is shown to belong to the suburban middle class and to have financial constraints. Yet whereas Markandaya's novel describes the attempt of young a man to bridge two different cultural worlds, Desai's novel describes an attempt to reconcile the prosaic world of his 'dustbin' town (p. 66) with the world of poetry represented by Nur.

17. Mentioned during my interview with Desai cited in my 'Introduction to Anita Desai'.

18. Lunn on Lukacs, op. cit., pp. 78 and 79.

19. Atma Ram, p. 102.

20. From my interview with Anita Desai.

21. This contrasts with the mythical evocation of Calcutta in Voices in the City. The earlier novel describes an aesthetic resolution in its depiction of the city and a man's escape into art - both of which In Custody interrogates.

22. Lunn, p. 35.

23. Quoted earlier; Atma Ram, p. 102.

24. S. A. Narayan, 'India', JCL (1985), p. 86.

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CONCLUSION

In the work of Markandaya, Sahgal and Desai we see the complex interaction between the contending demands of nationalist ideals and feminist aspirations. Markandaya's quest for cultural synthesis places her firmly as a forerunner in the field of Indo-Anglian fiction. The fact that so many of her novels (Nectar in a Sieve, Some Inner Fury, A Silence of Desire and Possession) are set in the period immediately preceding or succeeding Independence, is testimony to the centrality that national identity has in her novels. Her quest can be related to the desire to find unity in a country whose national movement was fraught with factionalism and whose birth into Independence was marred by bloodshed - an historical background with which she became very familiar during her years as a correspondent during the Second World War. Her oeuvre charts a development from a concern with the constituents of national identity to a formulation of feminist protest that exposes patriarchal oppression as a cross-cultural and long-standing phenomenon

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In Sahgal's work too we see a development towards feminist protest - although in her case this is set in broadly nationalist terms. Women's oppression is set within the wider context of injustice and the abuse of power, and women themselves become the symbols of victimisation and political injustice, an index of the condition of India itself.

Desai's oeuvre with it s metaphysical development from fatalistic protest to affirmative engagement with the present also engages with conceptions of national identity. In Where Shall We Go This Summer?, for example, Desai actively demythologises the Independence struggle by recalling the violence that accompanied partition - when 'having taken one step forward into civilisation, the country now reeled a dozen steps backward into barbarity' (p. 92). In that same novel she problematises the mythological figure of Sita, engaging with the relationship between history, national ideals and women's oppression. A symptomatic reading of her work suggests that though history may be something to be suffered, it is not necessarily something to be forgiven.

All three novelists engage with the concept of gender in terms that are structured by a concern with the particularities of Indian culture, Indian history and

Indian thought. This results in a problematic relationship between feminist protest and national allegiance, a relationship that carries through to the work of the new generation of Indian women writers - many of them expatriates - such as Bharati Mukherjee and Suniti Namjoshi. The work of Markandaya, Sahgal and Desai provides a broad frame of reference for the analysis of Indian women's fiction - a frame of reference which I will now analyse.

Aspects of Indian Literary Feminism

From my study the following seven features of Indian women's fiction have emerged:

Formal Plurality and Ideological Diversity

My study has shown the formal plurality and ideological diversity that can be found in the work of the first generation of Indian women novelists. This diversity and pluralism is a feature of India itself which contains a multiplicity of linguistic and religious traditions and over ninety different languages and dialects.

Thematic Preoccupation with Concepts of Nationhood

All the writers reveal an ongoing preoccupation with national identity. In the work of Kamala Markandaya this takes the form of a contrasting perspective between what defines the east on the one hand and the west on the other. The locus of Indian tradition is placed firmly within the rural landscape and is shown to be primarily the preserve of women.

In the work of Nayantara Sahgal national identity is historically placed and is closely linked to Gandhian ideology. Her oeuvre is a fine example of a nationalist writer attempting to address social and political issues of contemporary relevance.

In the work of Anita Desai, the conception of national identity draws on a rich reserve of Indian mythical and religious archetypes. The independence movement is analysed primarily through the impact it has on individual consciousness and destiny.

An Affirmation of Cultural and Sexual Difference

All three writers show a consciousness of their cultural heritage which is contrasted, sometimes

explicitly, with the norms and values of the West. Their novels suggest that although there are many endemic injustices and oppressions in Indian society, there are many traditions in their culture that are worth preserving.

In Markandaya's oeuvre we see a contrasting portrayal of Indian women and their western counterparts. (This is particularly evident in her novel Possession.) In Sahgal's autobiographies and her novels A Situation in New Delhi and Rich Like Us we see the celebration of the particular qualities of Indian womanhood, such as courage and moral fortitude, in characters who are shown to retain their 'femininity' despite being politically active. In Desai the particularities of the world of the Indian housewife are studied.

For both Markandaya and Desai identity is not only conceived in terms of cultural and national identity but also structured by an understanding of gender difference. This is most evident in Markandaya's Two Virgins and Desai's Cry The Peacock - novels which explore the nature and form of psychological and sexual oppression in Indian society.

A Development towards a Feminist Protest

Over the years there has been a discernible shift in perspective in the work of two of the three writers towards engaging more directly with the concerns of women in India. Markandaya's and Sahgal's more recent novels, The Golden Honeycomb and Rich Like Us, deal with women's oppression in very forceful ways. Feminism for these writers has splintered from their preoccupations with national identity.

The Use of Debate for the Revaluation of National Ideals

All three writers use dialogue and debate in their novels in order to interrogate social, political and cultural values. In Markandaya's The Golden Honeycomb the women are shown to question the men constantly; in Desai's Cry The Peacock an extended discussion on the Bhagavad Gita forms the ideological centre of the novel and reveals the structure of Maya's oppression; and several of Sahgal's novels are structured around protracted debates and dialogue showing characters arguing over social and political issues. The use of dialogue in their work serves to introduce into the texts what Bakhtin has described as 'extraliterary' genres which emphasise the construction and interplay of meaning.[1] Debate and

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dialogue constitute a direct, effective and provocative means of drawing attention to the authors' principal political concerns.

A Selective Form of Protest

The three writers emphasise different aspects of social and sexual oppression. Markandaya explores the effects of material need upon women, Sahgal explores the legislative subordination of women and Desai explores the impact of enforced isolation. Although these kinds of oppression are not specific to Indian society, their particular manifestations in India - including dowry systems, sati and the hierarchy of the joint family - are highlighted by the writers.

The Depiction and Interrogation of Fatalism and Passivity

The work of the three writers reveals the extent to which conceptions of the inevitability of suffering and the immutability of the social order permeate Indian thought. In many of the earliest novels in my study, most notably Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve and A Silence of Desire, we find a celebration of Indian women's stoicism and moral fortitude. This image of long-suffering and

stoic womanhood is also idealised in Sahgal's first novel A Time To Be Happy.

Yet it is a perspective that is progressively eroded in the work of both Markandaya and Sahgal. In Markandaya's A Handful of Rice we see that passivity is inherently counterproductive and in Sahgal's Rich Like Us we are shown the difference between choice and coercion, between willing sacrifice to a cause and enforced self-sacrifice, and the extent to which social factors enforce women's compliance. This is an outlook which provides the enabling context of so much of Desai's fiction with it s rationalisation that women must 'accept or die'.

It is clear that the religious, historical and ideological imperatives of conceptions of 'fatalism' and 'passivity' have had a profound effect on the writing of Indian women. Sahgal's The Day in Shadow and Desai's Cry The Peacock and Where Shall We Go This Summer? reveal women's struggle to assert themselves in the face of an internalised acceptance of passivity and fatalism. The shift in emphasis in the work of the three writers, from describing women as the victims of fate to the victims of society, is very significant. For it shows how the writers have worked through the struggle for self-realisation and self-affirmation in their fiction. It is a realisation

eloquently described by Lloyd Brown, albeit in a different cultural context:

> Fate or destiny in its most significant sense is not based on the mysterious predispositions of inscrutable supernatural forces, but on the function of social institutions and the shaping patterns of cultural traditions. In the woman's experience, fate is therefore the collective will of the community. In a subjective and much more crucial sense, the fate of each woman is ultimately determined by the extent to which she accepts or rejects that collective will.[2]

The Way Ahead

Feminist literary theory must take aboard the specific historical and cultural background of the text if it is to be of relevance to the writing of women from different parts of the world. Whereas the dominant categories of feminist literary theory draw their historical roots from the (western) women's movement, we have seen that in the work of Indian women, feminist protest emerges from the broader background of the Independence movement. I believe this may explain why there has been a significant increase in the number of Indo-Anglian women writers since Independence: before 1947 questions pertaining to women's role and women's rights were subsumed within the wider quest for national freedom; it is only since Independence that women have been able

to explore in greater depth the subjects of gender and sexual oppression.

The work of Markandaya, Sahgal and Desai reveals a formal diversity and ideological complexity that broadens our vision and challenges us to review what feminism may mean in a different culture and a different country.

References

1. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination, p. 411.
2. Lloyd Brown, Women Writers in Black Africa, p. 49.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ILR: Indian Literaray Review

JCL: Journal of Commonwealth Literature

JIWE: Journal of Indian Writing in English

JSAL: Journal of South Asian Literature

WLWE: World Literature Written in English

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